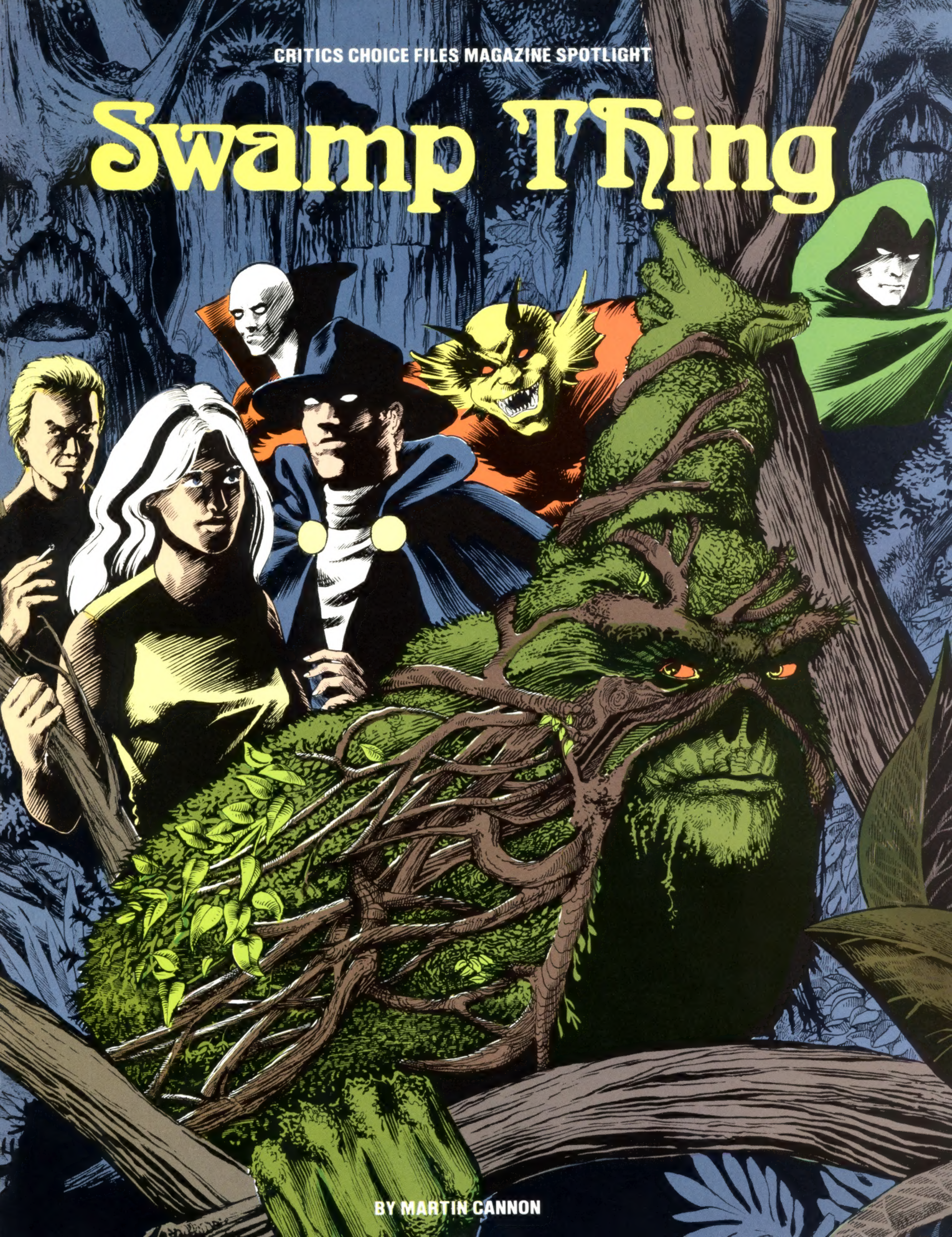
CRITICS CHOICE FILES MAGAZINE SPOTLIGHT

Swamp Thing



BY MARTIN CANNON

CRITICS CHOICE FILES MAGAZINE SPOTLIGHT

Swamp Thing

EDITED BY HAL SCHUSTER

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Green Mansion

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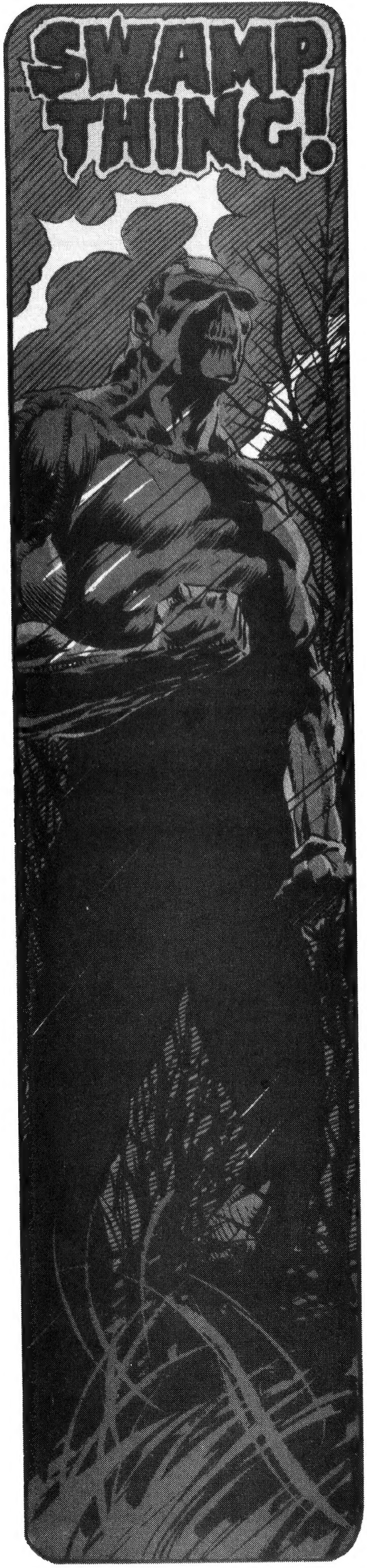
Dedicated to Karen...



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Introduction

I've noticed something interesting about the way we get our pop culture (not to mention some of our top culture) these days. When a movie comes out, it doesn't compete with just the current releases -- it competes with nearly every film Hollywood has churned up in the past four or five decades. Previously, if we had our hearts set on re-viewing a favored flick, we had to wait for television or the revival theatres to give us our celluloid fix. Now those of us with videotape machines can see what we want, when we want it. That's the new trend: convenient art. In the "fine arts" world, less-than-first-rank orchestras play to empty seats, because music lovers can have whatever symphony fits their mood, played by top-notch musicians, in the comfort of their homes.

I'm not sure if I truly favor this trend -- should our entertainment really come this easily? -- and I don't know how it will ultimately affect comic books. But comics are definitely part of it. The rise of the comics shop means that, if you're displeased by this month's wares, you can invest in any of umpteen zillion four-color fantasies from years gone by; past and present compete on an equal footing. Offended by **Watchmen**? Buy **Warlock** instead. Will it be Miller's Batman today, or the Neal Adams version? Or Bob Kane's? Or Gil Kane's? Would you like your Captain Marvel in green and white, in red and blue, or in the traditional red, white and yellow?

Our new freedom has drawbacks, however; for one thing, we lose patience with the second-rate more easily, and that's actually quite unfortunate, for one takes a subtle pleasure in watching individual talents grow and develop and find their way. Nowadays, the comic book artist new to the industry can't polish his skills over the years, because he vies head-to-head with the best of Adams and Kirby and Eisner; he has to hit the ground running. The audience, like Baby crying for a teat, wants immediate gratification.

But convenient art has definite advantages. Comics are no longer the ephemeral pleasures they once were; fans don't have to scour attics and barber shops and swap meets to get their fists on, say, older issues of **Swamp Thing**, for the creature lurks in his appointed space at the comics store, where he patiently awaits your inspection, and lo, he shall be with you always. You say that you just bought issues 31 through 50, but your disposable income won't cover 20 through 30? Relax. They'll be there next month. And next year.

Collecting comics was a much different affair when I was young (he said in tones reminiscent of Lionel Barry-

more). In the '60s and '70s you'd read (mostly in letters columns) of Eisner's seminal work, and Kirby's Newsboy Legion, and those appalling E C comics, and the original Captain Marvel, and so forth -- but you rarely got a chance to look at the blamed things. You might see them at comics conventions, but such affairs were few and far between, and youngsters could scarcely drive the necessary miles. Of course, you could always order older comics through certain mail order tycoons, but who wants to buy something sight unseen? And anyways, we urban kids were far too antsy for mail box shopping. Not convenient enough.

The present comics fan has an easier time of it, but he lacks one final convenience: guidance. The mass of old material is so dense it threatens to turn into a black hole; how do you find the interesting items in such a huge pile? The video buff, by contrast, can flip through any number of books and magazines which review practically the whole of cinematic history; if you're lost, let Leslie Halliwell or Roger Ebert or William K. Everson take your hand and lead. Similarly, the music lover can turn to the hefty paperback record guides published by Rolling Stone or Penguin, depending on his taste. What about the comics fan?

Comics-oriented magazines abound (if you ask me, there are too many), but they don't really fill the bill. They concentrate on current reviews, or on interviews, or on pieces which are more nostalgic than evaluative. Someday, someone will recognize past comics as living artworks, and will therefore compile a massive reader's guide -- not a price guide -- to the major comics series; this compendium (which would be updated annually) could direct our attention to all the most important "runs" and individual stories. We don't have such a reference book at present; we shall have to make do with guidebooks like the one you now hold, which concentrate on one comic and one creator.

This project has a narrow scope, but a sharp focus, and we can linger on the details. We're examining **Swamp Thing**, specifically the Alan Moore issues; the previous volume poured over issues 20 to 33 (including the second ST Annual), and also included a lengthy discussion of the original Wein/Wrightson run. This volume looks at issues 34 through 50, and includes an extensive interview with Steve Bissette, the artist many people (including this reader) most closely, and fondly, associate with the book.

I probably give Steve and his fellow pencillers short shrift in my reviews, and he'll no doubt castigate me for donating six manuscript pages to a review of ST #50 without once mentioning the excellent work he provided on his final issue. But praise grows monotonous after awhile. Let me simply say that the Bissette/Totleben issues remain some of the most significant in comics history; both artists will continue to do impressive work in their separate labors, but they wrought a minor miracle when they combined their talents. Totleben's highly detailed embellishing has changed our ideas about the way comics should look, yet his work would have seemed stiff and uninvolving without Bissette's sinuous, "organic" approach to figure drawing, his seemingly effortless perfection of composition, and his always-imaginative layouts. Bissette provided the master plan which all the subsequent ST pencillers -- Veitch, Woch,

Randall and Totleben (flying solo) -- have successfully followed.

All due hallelujahs to the artists; if they could hear us clapping, we'd offer a standing ovation. But most of the following critical analysis concentrates on Alan Moore, for we see comic book authors of his sort about as often as we glimpse California condors and other rare birds. Let's hope that recent unfavorable changes in the environment don't make his species extinct.

As you may have read, Moore has left DC. The major comics companies have instituted rating systems, seen by many major creators as an attempt to rein in the adult-oriented material which has drawn so much acclaim in the past few years. What's wrong with warning labels, you ask? Haven't they worked well in the movie industry? That's debatable; the motion picture rating code didn't stop censorship of ***9 1/2 Weeks*** or ***Crimes of Passion*** or the as-yet unfilmed ***Last Temptation of Christ***. All that the rating system has accomplished is the creation of an X-rated ghetto for the porn flicks, an R-rated ghetto for the mad-slasher flicks, and a G-rated ghetto for the ***Care Bears*** cartoons. One can argue that the MPAA labels have worked against the creation of truly adult films, and that a similar labelling system in comics will work against the creation of mature products like **Watchmen**.

After all, novels don't bleat "Mature readers only!"on their covers -- except for the rankest forms of literary smut, in which case the "warning" is actually a marketing gimmick. Place those words on comics and buyers may expect to see, not **Swamp Thing**'s usual fare, but something truly salacious. The label may simply create a ghetto.

I can understand why Alan Moore wouldn't want to work in a ghetto, and why he's packed his bags. He may move out of comics altogether. He has always said that he believes in the medium and didn't see it as merely a stepping stone to better forms of employment, but there's certainly no reason for him to fight for the privilege of writing comics, just as there's no effective strategy for battling invincible ignorance. Our loss. We can read his novels and watch his films, should they come to pass, but there are already enough talented novelists, and even screenwriters, in the world. Mainstream comics can bear the removal of a key creator about as easily as a man on crutches can bear the removal of a hand. (If Miller goes too, say good bye to the other hand.)

But if Moore leaves comics, or is forced to write for the less-visible, less-profitable companies, we can still enjoy the body of work he has already deposited in the comics stores. This work, especially the Swamp Thing stories, has been one of the prime factors in the maturation of the medium. Like it or not, comics are no longer kid stuff. No, they haven't fully grown up; you might say they're at that awkward age. Later comics historians -- who shall certainly speak to a largely adult audience -- will probably point to certain key books, such as Miller's **Daredevil** and Moore's **Swamp Thing**, and say that here was something very much like the bar-mitzvah of an artform, the day a pimply adolescent with a breaking voice and a peach-fuzz chin declared "Today I am a man."

For God's sake, let's not stunt the kid's growth now.

UH-
OH.
I'D RATHER
BE IN
PITTSBURGH.

SWAMP THING
CREATED BY
LEN WEIN and
BERNI WRIGHTSON
"THE CURSE"
ALAN MOORE: WRITER
STEPHEN BISSETTE
and
JOHN TOTLEBEN
ARTISTS
KAREN BERGER: EDITOR
TATJANA WOOD: COLORIST
JOHN COSTANZA: LETTERER
3

Interview
IT IS DONE.

Bissette

Steve Bissette, the penciller most closely associated with Swamp Thing, is not only a very gifted artist, but an insightful, well-spoken commentator on the comics medium; I'm extremely grateful for the hours he donated to this interview, and for the kind help he extended this project. I apologize for beginning this conversation in medias res; the cassette recorder clicked on while Bissette was rummaging through all his material from the early days of his **Swamp Thing** tenure. He began by describing some of these items:

SB: I have the proposal that Marty Pasko made to DC, just at the point that Alan came on the book. I've dug out all my letters with Alan -- Alan used to write gigantic letters. I have a 22-page letter from Alan. When we started, the energy was just incredible. It continued well into a year, year-and-a-half on the book.

MC: Back up a bit. What were Pasko's ideas like?

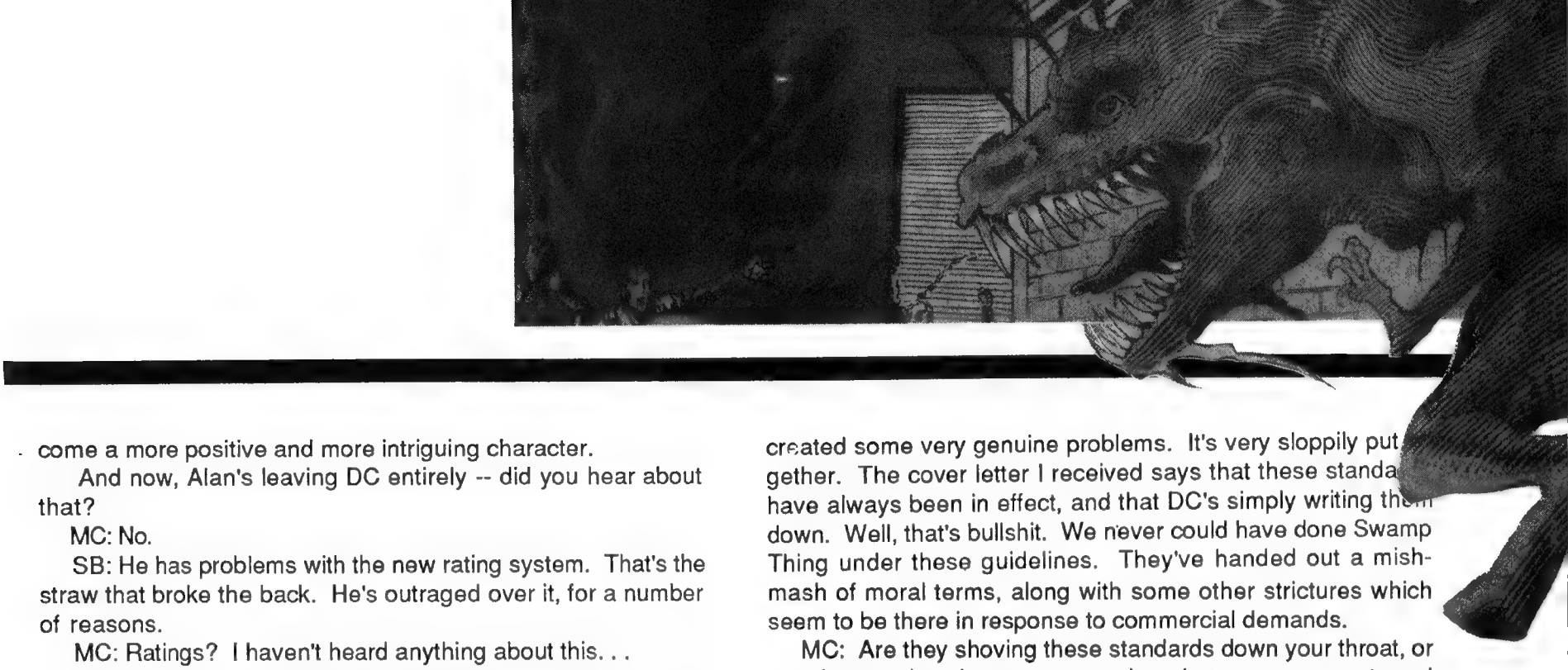
SB: I just dug up two of Marty's letter's to Len Wein, copies of which were sent to me. Marty's approach to the book was pretty much along the lines of Rod Serling's ***Twilight Zone***. Issue #16, our first issue on the book, was to be the role model for all succeeding issues.

Maybe I should back up a bit further, and explain that when John and I came to the book, Marty was trying to keep one foot in comics, Swamp Thing specifically, and the other foot in animation. And you know which one won out. Marty left by mutual agreement, though it really wasn't under the best of circumstances. He was very far behind; the pressure was on Len to get a new writer on the book. We were behind, too -- in part because Marty was late, and in part because my first child had just been born. Also, I should say that neither John nor I knew just how long we wanted to stick it out with Swamp Thing. Marty's done some excellent things in comics, but neither of us felt that his work on this book was among his best. John and I looked at **Warrior** magazine, and mused about how nice it would be if somebody like Alan Moore could write the book. And eventually, that's exactly whom Len picked, though not through our suggestion.

Alan was nervous; this was his first American book, and his editor was the creator of Swamp Thing. He knew that he couldn't write it as Len would, and he had no interest in doing so. He felt that the character did need some broad and basic changes, but he didn't want to step on Len's toes. Actually, Len brought Alan along because he wanted those changes, and we all felt very comfortable with issue #21.

At the point we stepped in on Swamp Thing, the character was ten years old, give or take. Everyone who worked on the book had beaten into the ground what had, at first, been a very beautiful, very moving concept -- the idea of a human being trapped in a monstrous body. I think that it's correct to say that the thrust of the original series was the character's desire to become a man, after ten years. . .man, everybody was sick of it! It turned into wallowing and self-pity. That was my big problem with the first 15 issues Marty wrote; Tom Yeates' whole run on the book began and ended with that business of Swamp Thing dying of some sort of bacterial consumption, which just added to the feeling that a dead weight was dragging the book down into a quicksand of misery.

John and I felt -- and it turned out that Alan felt the same way -- that Swamp Thing shouldn't just be a man trapped in a monster's body; we felt that he was a plant-being, an elemental, with a great deal of power. Everything we did was geared toward that concept. As a result, what Alan's left DC with is not just this guy who happens to be a bit stronger than everybody else, but a much more interesting character. He's be-



come a more positive and more intriguing character.

And now, Alan's leaving DC entirely -- did you hear about that?

MC: No.

SB: He has problems with the new rating system. That's the straw that broke the back. He's outraged over it, for a number of reasons.

MC: Ratings? I haven't heard anything about this. . .

SB: How much do you want me to go into this? I could go on for hours. This goes way beyond the Code. John and I first heard about it from Frank Miller in November. Frank was, understandably, upset. DC had put the rating system together behind closed doors. I suppose we shouldn't be affronted, as freelancers, that they did it that way -- the artists are spread all over the country; there was probably no manageable way DC could have gathered us all together and discussed the matter with us. Any ways, Frank found out somehow, and in late November he sent us some material, including a letter from Jennette Kahn to the retailers, stating that they had set up this rating system, and that they were putting down, in writing, a set of house standards. DC did not officially notify the freelancers until mid-December. That's when we were informed that the system would be in effect January 1, a mere two-and-a-half weeks later.

MC: What are their reasons for doing this? Were there specific complaints?

SB: Actually, I'm not sure. There were some letters from a couple of distributors to the retailers, stating that they felt that it was necessary for the companies to set up some sort of rating system. The only other thing I have to go on is that the **Comics Journal** called me, and asked if I was aware that DC had instituted the rating system because they were afraid of an attack from Jerry Falwell.

MC: Yeah. I keep pretty close tabs on that right-wing religious stuff -- "know thy enemy," and all that. They're coming down pretty hard on comics these days.

SB: Well, I wouldn't know about that. We don't get many of those programs out here. In New England, specifically in Vermont, the attitude is "live and let live." People out here don't watch the Christian networks, unless they have a satellite dish. Are they really tearing into comics?

MC: Oh yeah.

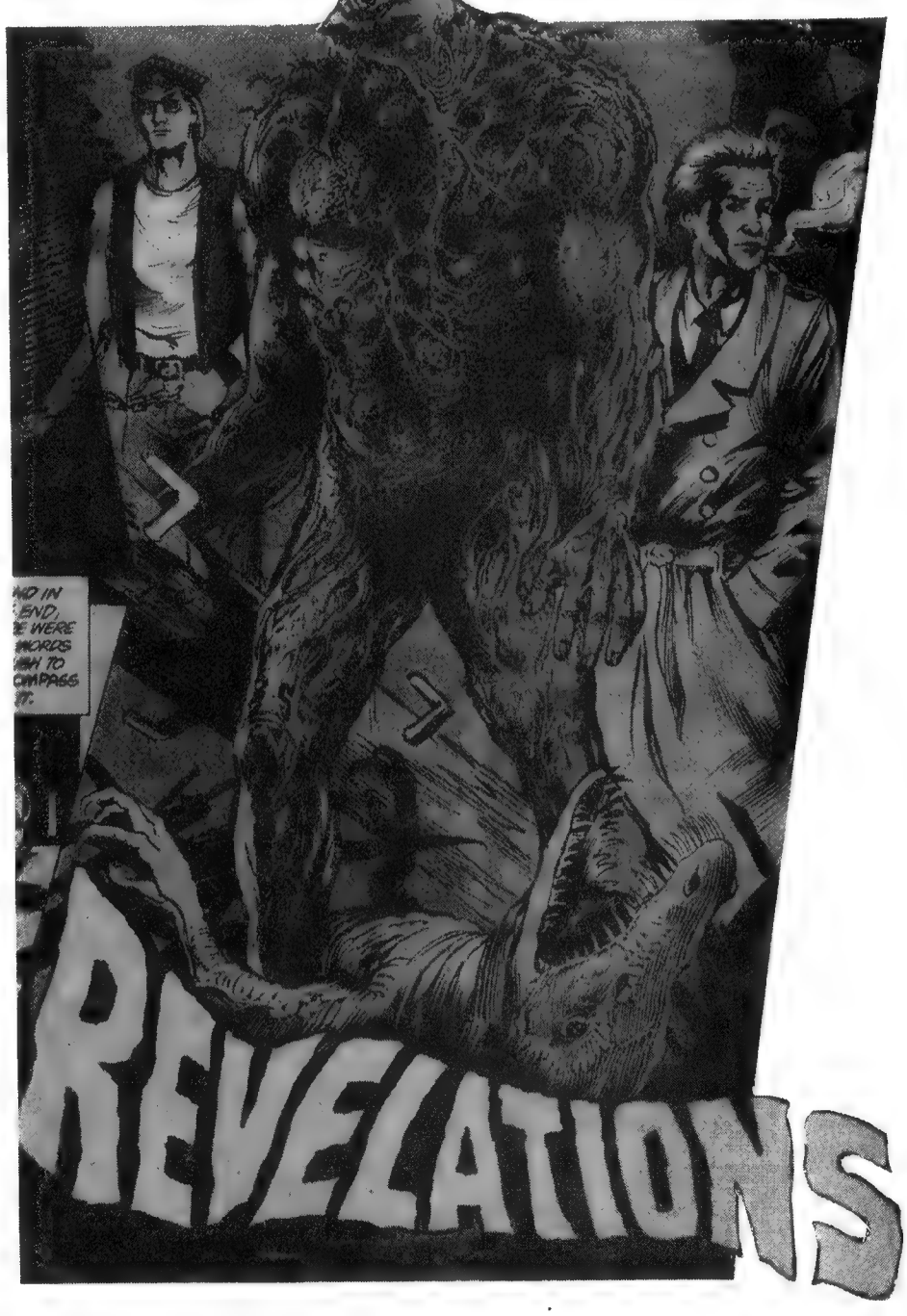
SB: Any specific comics?

MC: Oh, you know how these people are. They don't really know comics. They just walk into a comics store and arbitrarily pick out something, and find some aspect of it that offends them.

SB: Well, all I can tell you is that if DC was afraid of an attack, they were afraid of something that just wasn't real. It wasn't a specific attack directed at one of their books. Whereas the rating system that they've put together has created some very genuine problems. It's very sloppily put together. The cover letter I received says that these standards have always been in effect, and that DC's simply writing them down. Well, that's bullshit. We never could have done Swamp Thing under these guidelines. They've handed out a mish-mash of moral terms, along with some other strictures which seem to be there in response to commercial demands.

MC: Are they shoving these standards down your throat, or are they saying that you can write whatever you want, and they'll just slap a label on it?

SB: That's what isn't clear. The letter is in two parts. The first part sets out the standards, and the implication is that all DC books have to be done according to these guidelines. The



second part is the rating system itself: "U" for universal, "M" for mature, and "A" for adult. Do the standards apply only to universal books? It's completely unclear. Also, they mention that books rated "M" or "A" will be put out onto the marketplace under what they call "controlled distribution," and that term is never explained. But it doesn't sound good. "Controlled distribution" implies that only certain shops will be getting the books, or that shops can refuse to carry those books. However you add it up, it seems that "M" and "A" books will not be as widely available.

It's all very mystifying; all I know is that I'm against censorship in any form. In the letter, they refer to Swamp Thing specifically. I quote: "However, when we arrived at that point in our publishing history when some comics were no longer "kid stuff," we began to feel uncomfortable. If a ten-year-old child picked up a Swamp Thing, his or her parents would have a right to be concerned. .many parents wouldn't care, but some would. We wanted to let them know that Swamp Thing was not your everyday comic book, so we labeled it 'sophisticated suspense.'"

Now, I see a distinct difference between setting up guidelines and labelling a book, after it's done, without interfering with the creative team. I grew up with that system. The comics that got me into wanting to do comics were the undergrounds, which were always labelled "for adults only," for obvious reasons. I have no problem with labelling books. John and I are doing a horror anthology called **Taboo** for Dave Sim, and we intend to have "adults only" on the cover of the book; there's material in the book I wouldn't want my four-year-old daughter to see.

MC: But how will boycotting DC affect you guys? Moore won't write for Marvel, and now he won't write for DC. He's kind of running out of options.

SB: He's not running out of options. You're making the mistake a lot of people make -- you think that if you don't work for Marvel or DC you don't do comics. Alan could publish his own books and do very well, thank you; he's become extremely viable in the marketplace. Alan's working on his first novel right now. He's working on screenplays. There's no end to the media he could plug into -- let's just hope he doesn't leave comics. He's always said that he never saw comics as a stepping stone to better things; he's always said that comics have a great potential that has never been realized, because the medium has always been considered kid stuff.

That's the very phrase used in DC's letter: the moment comics stopped being kid's stuff, the management became uncomfortable. The publishers themselves are afraid of the maturing of the art form.

MC: No, they're not. I think they're just afraid of the right-wingers.

SB: They're afraid of maturity as well. If they're afraid of the right-wingers, they would simply label the books. But I think they're concerned with the material itself; I think they want to tone it down. That's like trying to tone down the behavior of a child when he hits puberty -- good luck

DC just had their best year in quite awhile because they put out adult products that really broke some new ground. What would you name as the best comics in recent times? **Dark Knight**? **Shadow**? **Watchmen**? Those were the first comics in a long while that could satisfy an adult who was simply looking for a good read. The ratings are a backlash against that. DC is backing away, when they should be standing their ground.

SWAMP THING
CREATED BY LEN WEIN AND BERNI WRIGHTSON
ALAN MOORE WRITER
BISSETTE, TOTLEBEN, & RANDALL : ARTISTS
KAREN BERGER. EDITOR
TATJANA WOOD: COLORIST

As for the question of how this will affect John and I -- I don't know. I'm still doing covers for them. But I won't approach them with the projects that are near and dear to my heart, because, first, I don't know if they're interested, and second, the type of material I'm into certainly wouldn't fit these standards.

MC: DC may have just given the independent publishers a shot in the arm.

SB: That's right. There are a lot of alternatives.

MC: Then again, John Byrne certainly isn't going to make over a quarter million dollars a year at Eclipse.

SB: Hard to say. If people like Byrne started to work for the smaller companies, those companies might begin to make that sort of money. Although right now it's not viable for, say, Frank Miller to go to Eclipse Comics. Frank is a talent, at this point, who possesses a voice that needs to be heard, and there's no doubt that DC and Marvel reach more readers.

Maybe I shouldn't attack DC too harshly; they've made quality material available, at a time when Marvel would not make it available. And right now, the management there is very nervous; I'm sure that in their eyes I'm a villain, simply because I'm talking about this. But let me go on with the letter they sent us: "Destructive behavior cannot be shown as acceptable. . ."

MC: Ha!

SB: "We aim to maintain a realistic view of society, an accurate representation of racial, sexual and ethnic diversity."

Language: "In books aimed at a universal audience, we will avoid language that is generally deemed to be unacceptable at the average family dinner table." What does that mean?

MC: Whoever wrote that never had dinner with my family. . .

SB: Yeah, they obviously haven't been to a lot of dinner tables. A lot of what they say in these standards and practices seems unreal to me. This statement applies directly to Swamp Thing: "We will continue to explore supernatural themes, in the literary tradition of fantasy, without imparting to them any religious significance. . ."

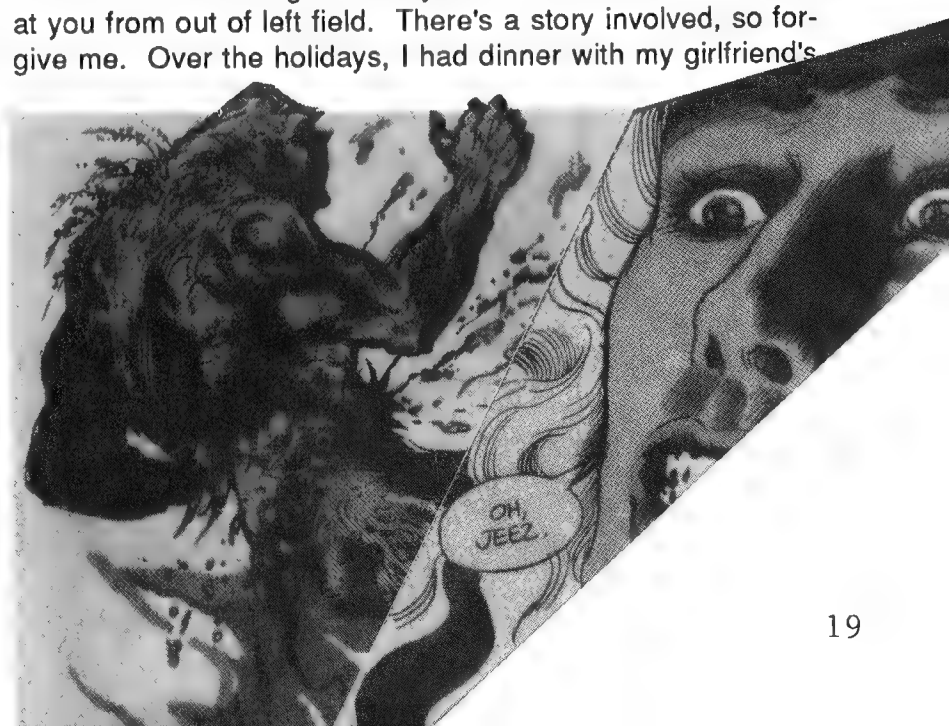
MC: Aha. That's it right there. Whenever you turn on the Christian Broadcasting Network, that's their main beef. To them, anything that has a tinge of the supernatural is Satan's work.

SB: The Bible has more than a tinge of the supernatural! God is supernatural! As soon as you accept the idea of God, then you accept the idea of the Devil. And as soon as you accept the idea of the Devil, then you make way for characters like the Demon. He comes from Hell; he's a comic book character who fosters, like it or not, Judeo-Christian belief, just as stories about the Golem deal in Jewish belief. These characters carry all sorts of religious baggage with them; if the fundamentalists consider these characters evil, then they're blind to their own beliefs. At what point do you say that fiction that deals with the Devil does so to a good end or a bad end?

MC: Yeah, but these people are nuts. They think that E.T.is the work of demons because he has supernatural powers.

SB: We had a taste on Swamp Thing of that sort of fanaticism. In issue 25, Jason Blood goes into a head shop and buys a poster -- Goya's "The Sleep of Reason." John and I drew the guy behind the counter to look like Alan Moore, who has long hair and a beard. Karen Berger got a letter, saying 'How dare you show Jesus Christ in a head shop selling occult supplies?'

MC: Let me change the subject a bit, and throw something at you from out of left field. There's a story involved, so forgive me. Over the holidays, I had dinner with my girlfriend's



old history professor -- a very dignified fellow -- and he said he was going to be teaching at Princeton, and my girlfriend said she was translating a German novel, and then they asked me what I was doing. I said I was working on a book about Swamp Thing. You can imagine the looks I got. I said things like "But you gotta understand, Swamp Thing's really good!" but I only dug myself a deeper hole. Does that sort of thing happen to you, and, if so, how do you deal with it?

SB (laughing): Oh yeah. That's happened to me plenty of times. The best story I can think of has to do with the time I went to Louisiana. I went there to do some research, because I hadn't been there since I was a kid, and we were drawing Louisiana -- we set Swamp Thing in a real town, Houma. So I went to Houma and looked around, and I decided to stop at the fish and game department. I wanted to get ahold of any and all maps, pamphlets, anything that John and Alan and I could use as research material to make the book more rooted in the reality. (And that approach worked, by the way -- when we showed the hospital in Houma, we got letters saying "That is the hospital!")

Anyway, here I am, a long-haired, bearded yankee at the fish and game department, and there's an old native of Houma behind the counter. And I was asking for all this stuff in triplicate, because I needed copies for Alan and John. And he asks me "What's all this fo-ah?" And I tell him that I'm working on a comic book that's set in Houma. "What's the name of it?" he says. I say "Swamp Thing." He goes "Swamp Tank? What's that?" and the more I tried to describe the book to him, the deeper in shit I got. They thought I was some long-haired yankee up to no good. Actually, they were great about giving me material, but I was definitely suspect in their eyes.

But that's part of the onus of having the interests I do. My whole life has been like that, Martin; the stuff that I love and have always loved is the stuff that other people have frowned upon as garbage, or worse than garbage -- something that might actually be morally unhealthy. My favorite movies when I was growing up had titles like Twitch of the Death Nerve. Try bringing up Twitch of the Death Nerve in conversation!

I'm proud of what I do, though. Some people in comics -- well, you should see how embarrassed they act in mixed company.

MC: Well, I can understand why you should be proud. What I can't understand is why comics fans squawk and complain so much about artists. As I mention in the introduction to my book, the drawing in many comics is almost as good as much of what you'll examine in a class on the history of drawing. Do you think that many people just don't realize how good the drawing in comics really is?

SB: Comics first became important at the very time in the history of art when all branches of "fine art" were exploring things like Cubism, Abstraction, and everything except academic art. Representational art was considered bad at that time. Comics may have been the only visual art form that maintained the tradition and standards of representational art. Artists like Reed Crandall and Lou Fine -- their figure work was just impeccable. And the expression of that tradition in our generation -- the generation of artists we grew up with -- would be in the work of Neal Adams. When I first saw that stuff, I just thought it was incredible that this guy could put an arm, a face, a leg, a figure in any perspective and make it work. All that knowledge that we've learned from the history of art might have been lost if it were not for comics, and for the artists who continued to deal with the classical figure. That fact, if nothing else, makes comics important in the history of drawing.

And now what's interesting about fine art is that it's going back to those traditional values, with things like photorealism.

MC: I've always felt that comics had their own "abstractions," which they've slowly been stripping away. Comics are no longer Lichtenstein stuff -- no longer bright patches of color surrounded by thick outlines.

SB: What you're referring to is something I call, for lack of a better term, coloring book drawing, and probably the best example of that sort of art would be C.C. Beck's Captain Marvel. The popular view has always been that this was the only sort of art comics had to offer. But next to that, you had the work of a Lou Fine, or a Reed Crandall, who put a lot of detail into their stuff. I don't think you could call Graham Ingels or the other EC artists coloring book artists.

MC: Though you and Totleben may have been the first artists to introduce such a wide range of grey scales into traditional comics drawing.

SB: Well, I would also point to Alfredo Alcala. I have a lot of problems with some of what Alfredo does, especially some of his inking on Swamp Thing, but some of the stuff he did with Buscema on the early, black-and-white Conan was just exquisite. He was clearly influenced by illustrators like Franklin Booth. That's part of John's background as well. Booth is also clearly the model for the direction Berni Wrightson went into, especially in his Frankenstein book. So I wouldn't say that we were the first.

And a lot of that style comes from John. Not so much me. The people who influenced my ink line were artists like Greg Irons or Joe Kubert. The energy of the line is really important. John prefers a very textured, very controlled, classic look, as opposed to the sort of frenetic craziness that I like to do. We really meshed on that level. Whenever I tended to get too loose, John would always anchor it down, while, on the other hand, the fact that my pencils were so damn spastic would free up what he was doing. I look back on that work very fondly. It's not as though John could do that himself, or that I could do that myself. On some of the issues, when we were really cooking, it looks like a third person got in there.

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41
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SWAMP THING
BY ALAN MOORE
STEPHEN BISSETTE
AND ALFREDO ALCALA
1935
50
1985

MC: I'm surprised by what you said about Alcala. In certain ways, what he did seems closer to your pencils. . .

SB: Yeah, but to me, that fidelity is not so important as the chemistry that John and I had. From the beginning, if John saw another approach that was better than what I had penciled, he changed it. And that was completely with my understanding. I gave him pencils that were tight, but with enough play in there that he had room to do his thing.

Part of why John and I worked so well together -- well, I should make clear that we're friends; we go back some years; we were not a team put together by Len Wein. We went after the job together, as penciller and inker. Actually, we tried it the other way round on some sample pages, with me inking John, but it clearly wasn't as good. I had a much stronger storytelling sense then, though that isn't true anymore. And John had a much better finish.

Nowadays, John doesn't want to ink -- he doesn't want to ink me or anyone else. Because, you know, ultimately an inker is tracing lines. Or at least, that's the way most people look at inking in this business. I'm reminded of something Scott McCloud said to me in a letter: what most comics professionals call "pencilling" is what everybody else calls "preparing to draw," and what most comics professionals call "inking" is what everyone else calls "drawing." But when John and I worked together, we had a real give-and-take. Sometimes his fidelity to my work was exact, sometimes he went into a new direction.

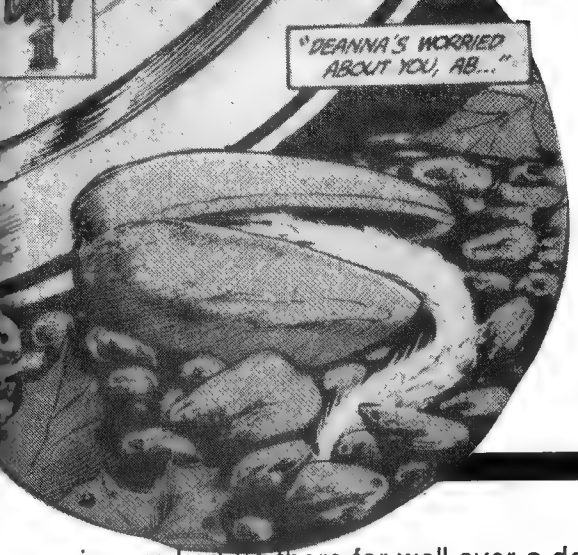
MC: Did the DC management appreciate that look, or was it too unusual for them?

SB: The first time I spoke to anyone higher up than the editor was after issue 29. By that time, the look on Swamp Thing had already been established; we were really cooking. Prior to that, however -- before Swamp Thing -- whenever John and I went to DC for interviews, we never got work from them. Not really. What work we got was very sporadic. Actually, I did a little, and John did nothing -- he was told that there was no room for his drawing style in comics.

MC: You're kidding.

SB: Yeah, that's true. I'll never forget my first interview. I had to go up to see Vince Colletta, who was inking a particularly abominable page of The Legion of Superheroes. He looked at my stuff, and was very complimentary, but he told me that I should go into advertising art. He was very flattering, but also very discouraging. And he pointed to the page he was working on, filled with work that I couldn't stand, and said that this was what I had to aspire to.

I guess that happens all the time; everybody has stories like that. I remember the time Rick Estrada came to teach at the Kubert school, he had just been told that if he wanted to continue to work at DC he would have to draw like Berni Wrightson or Neal Adams. And this is with Rick Estrada hav-



ing worked up there for well over a decade, and having been one of their real workhorses. He had his own style!

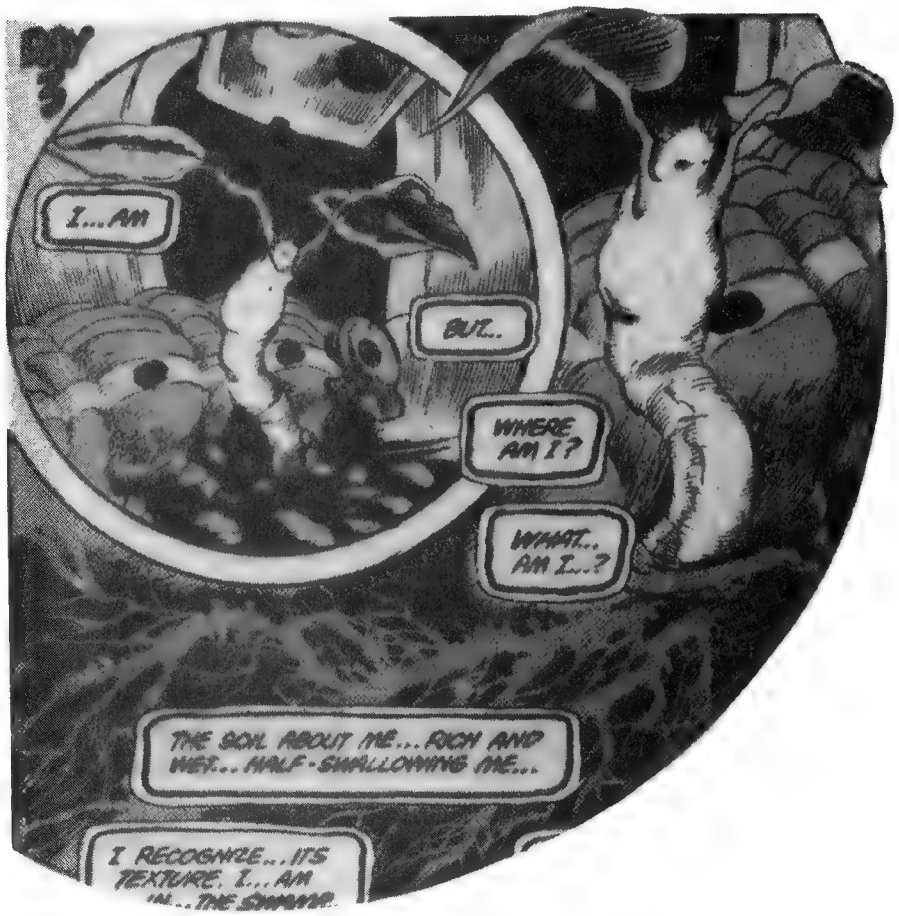
But let me get back to Alfredo. He comes from a generation of Filipino artists who came into the American comics industry in the '70s, and they all share a characteristic that I was aware of when I first pencilled for Alfredo -- this would be issue #41. They are impeccable technicians, but a lot of their drawings are emotionally dead. That's true of Alcala's work, Nino's -- and I love Nino -- and Nestor Redondo. So when I pencilled for Alfredo, I went ten steps beyond what I would do for John -- if Abby was screaming, I had her shrieking her head off. I knew that Alfredo would tone it down, so I shot over the mark.

Also, John was not afraid of using heavy, choppy blacks when he had to. Alfredo's blacks are always constituted of a million tiny, scratchy lines. In #41, I rendered the black characters with the edge of my pencil; the picture I had in my head was of the way Joe Kubert rendered black people -- there were heavy shadows in there, very expressive; a lot of strong emotion comes out, and you get a feel for the planes of their faces. Alfredo changed all of my heavy blacks to his little grey lines, and that really diminished the effect.

On the good side, John often has trouble with architecture, and machines and cars. You give Alfredo a piece of architecture, and it comes out exquisitely.

MC: How often do you use photographs in your work?

SB: I'm trying to get away from it. I'll use photos if I'm drawing an actual airplane, or building, or car. As for characters -- well, I worked from photographs in much of my early professional work. The reason was this: Many young artists, when they draw a character out of their head, draw idealized versions of themselves. If you look back at my earlier work, there's this kid that I always drew -- usually a blond kid -- who had the same face, same expression I had.



About that time, I met a man named Vincent Fago, who packages books, and he looked at my work; he pointed out that my fat people didn't look like fat people -- they were that same skinny kid I always drew, with a couple of extra inches around the waist. He was right. He suggested that if I had trouble picturing different characters, I should use an actor, or someone else I had photos of, to use as my model. Ideally, I would have a real person pose for me, which is how Craig Russell does it. You can see there's a point in Craig's work where he shifted from drawing characters out of his head to using models. What I did was use actors I knew well -- you say the name Strother Martin to me, and I picture him. I did a story for **Marvel Preview** in which I cast Clint Eastwood as a cop in the future. The last time I did that was on Swamp Thing. When John and I started out, we had to come up with a vision of Abby that we could agree on; I can't speak for John -- I don't think he's ever used photos -- but I used Sigourney Weaver as a model.

MC: Sigourney Weaver?

SB: That's who I had in my head. That was the image I was going after -- very strong, very independent. But after about two issues, she wasn't Sigourney Weaver anymore; she was Abby. These days, the only time I turn to photos is if it's a dramatic moment and I want to use an unusual lighting effect. I'll look through photos, or put a VHS tape on, such as James Whale's ***Bride of Frankenstein***. When you're just drawing out of your head, you can never guess the way the shadow of a nose goes up into the eye socket and over the forehead when the face is lit from below.

MC: Would you recommend that beginning comics artists use photographic reference material simply to unlearn the bullshit anatomy that you learn from comics?

SB: But there's bullshit anatomy in photographs, too; there are distortions in photographs that you cannot make work in a drawing. When you photograph someone running, the leg blurs; it may look great in the photo, but when you draw it, it looks silly as hell. But working from photos has its place; I'm not a purist. My attitude is, whatever tool you have to use to get what's in your head onto paper is fair game. If you have to draw on a burlap bag, as far as I'm concerned, you can paste a piece of burlap down, as long as you can make it print.

MC: I guess what I was referring to was the way new artists learn how the body is put together from one generation of comic book artists, who learned from a previous generation, who

learned from a previous generation. . .

SB: They should look at the body. Photos are not the best thing; the best thing is life drawing. . .

MC: I love life drawing too, but I can't pose Superman, and I can't afford a model.

SB: You don't need to have Superman pose for you. If you know, from life drawing, how ordinary proportions go on ordinary people, then you're going to be able to bring a little more unconscious knowledge to your drawing of Superman. If you copy Superman from Curt Swan's version or John Byrne's version or Wayne Boring's version, then you're just going to end up with a second-generation re-hash of their versions.

MC: But wouldn't you agree that Byrne's Superman, or just about any other artist's superheroes, all show mistakes? They don't even look like real bodybuilders. For one thing, you always see their rib cages; those characters all look like they're holding their breath.

SB: That's not just superheroes. That all goes back to Greek archetypes of perfect human figures. You know how in art school they give you that line about how seven heads equals the heroic figure, and five heads equals the normal figure. That's all part of the tradition we inherited from the Greeks and the Romans.

Let's generalize and pick the perfect superhero artist for each decade. In the late '60s and '70s it was Neal Adams. Everyone was doing his version of the Neal Adams idealized figure. Now we've arrived at the George Perez/John Byrne version. Heaven forbid that we enter a Frank Miller generation! I love his drawing, but the idea of lots of other people trying to copy that. . ! And actually, some people tell me that there are artists out there trying to draw like John and me. If so, then they're once removed from our being once removed from reality. But you can say good and bad things about this process. Look at Bill Sienkeiwicz, who at one point was considered a Neal Adams clone. Then, at a very definite point in his career, he broke off into his own direction.

MC: Sienkiewicz was the only one who was as good as Adams.

SB: Right; that's my point. "Neal Adam's clone" was always used as a criticism, but I don't see it as a criticism. I'll bet that if you look at most artists' development, you'll find that -- whether they do it in the public eye, as Bill did, or in their sketchbooks -- they spent a lot of time copying. I know that in my formative years, I copied Jack Kirby as closely as I could. Thank God none of that stuff was ever seen! But you have to go through those periods, through an infatuation with certain artists, as you work toward your own approach.

A specific example right now: Keith Giffen. People are pointing their finger at him and saying 'that looks exactly like Munoz's work.' But Munoz doesn't have Keith's story sense -- and besides, Keith is already going in his own direction; he has built on that base. But when you do that in the public eye, as opposed to the privacy of your sketchbook, you may find yourself in an uncomfortable position with some people. I don't think that doing what Keith did is a good or a bad thing, as long as the artist continues growing.

The key advice I would give to young artists, or writers, is look outside of comics. You've got to live a life, watch movies, read books -- plug into things other than comics. The people who just read comics and enter the profession and start regurgitating comics -- they may become successful at it, but their work is very boring. It becomes incestuous. The exciting people, the key creators -- Alan Moore, Neal Adams -- they bring stuff into comics that didn't exist there before.

MC: I wanted to ask about the coloring in Swamp Thing. The coloring is all well done, but when you see those pages in black and white, they look just terrific. I sometimes wished the book could have come out in black and white.

SB: We always did too. John's art doesn't need any color; he's just a master black-and-white draftsman. The color oftentimes would muddy the work a bit. Although the color was exquisitely done; Tatjana Wood was the colorist, and for my money she is one of the best in the business. She brought such a subtle touch to the work; she would lean toward pastel colors, whereas most comic book colorists usually go for bright, flashy, eye-irritating color. Tatjana wouldn't use a bright red; she'd go for a dark red. It would always be a very shrewd choice -- a very effective choice. For color we're working with pieces of film being cut in a room full of underpaid women. Tatjana Wood could give them her best tones, and it could come out looking like hell. You have to give them simple effects, things that can be realised. Not to mention that comic book color is bad color in terms of art, the most horrible color you could imagine. It's printed on toilet paper, paper that just drinks up the ink. Or, even worse, it's printed like that Swamp Thing annual we did; Tatjana was horrified when that came out. It was the type of ink they used; they were using for the first time, I think, water-based ink. There was a different reaction with the paper, and the Swamp Thing's green -- which usually gets toned down by the toilet paper it's printed on -- suddenly, it was all there; he was green. Even worse was the demon, with his red and yellow costume. Printed on that paper with that ink, he was like staring at headlights for two hours.

MC: Let's talk about your storytelling choices. A lot of critics bring out the knives and guns when they talk about odd, jagged panel arrangements. But you used those arrangements, and so has everyone who has followed you. Did anybody tell the other guys "do this as Bissette would"?

SB: I don't know. But that's why I didn't care much when the fill-in issues started to happen, because I felt that we had, by that time, very clearly established a look. That was something I set out to do. My approach to storytelling was, partly,

just my innate style, as you can see if you look back at my work before Swamp Thing. My attitude with page design and storytelling is that you have to lead the eye, you have to clearly tell the story, and you have to make it as exciting as possible. For me, "making it exciting" means, graphically, varying the design of the panels on the page without losing the clarity of the storytelling. I want to grab you by the shirt collar. Perhaps it's self-indulgent, but that's how I always tried to do it.

MC: You never impeded the narrative.

SB: That was the challenge. I can do the craziest page design in the world, but if it skews the storytelling, it's no good. The key to designing a page is the fall-down point; if you ever have to stop and think about where you have to look next, I've lost you, and I've messed up what Alan Moore's doing. You'll lose the emotional impact of the story, even if you're held up for just a fraction of a second. I always design a page for the maximum emotional impact. That impact comes not just from the story, not just from the composition within the panels, but from the page layout. Perhaps the biggest compliment I ever got was on issue #34. I wanted to design the entire comic so that it would simulate a hallucinogenic trance. That's what we wanted the reader to feel, whether or not they've ever taken acid or some other hallucinogenic. (And I won't say whether I have.) I wanted to find a way of shifting the reader's perspective, of changing the way he looked at the comic. of making you turn the book at the very moment Abby begins to feel the effects. And the compliment I received was that people told me they weren't aware that they had turned the book on its side until they got to a page with an ad facing it. I worked like hell to get the reader to turn the page naturally.

MC: I wonder if you were the first person to use that technique.

SB: I don't know. There was that John Byrne issue of the Fantastic Four. But if the book's printed sideways -- that doesn't mean anything by itself. I was trying to alter the way you look at comics. Think about it: I've been at this for ten

years. An artist like Kubert or Kirby has been at it for a lot longer. We're always working with that same damn proportion. It was a lot of fun to be working with a differently shaped page -- though it was a lot of work; that issue went very slowly. Fortunately, Karen was willing to give us the extra time we needed.

MC: How much do you have to care about the story you're doing, and the character you're doing, in order to draw at your best?

SB: Judging from what's happened this past year, I have to care a lot. I took on a lot of jobs halfheartedly, and I look back on them, and it all just looks awful to me. I've gotta care. And the last thing I really cared about was Swamp Thing.

MC: What I was getting at was -- well, if I drew a picture of Superman, and someone asked me "Oh, do you like drawing Superman?" I might say "No; I liked drawing the ear, the leg, the nose." Those things could belong to anybody.

SB: I see what you mean. That's a valid point. But there's more than one way of looking at it. Another answer came from Sergio Aragones, who was asked if he ever had days when he just didn't feel like drawing. And he answered "What, do I ever have days when I don't feel like breathing?" To someone like Sergio, that's how drawing works. For me, it's not like that. I mean, yes, I can always draw. But this past year I took on, for one reason or another, projects I didn't care about, and it wasn't worth it -- the hardship I went through, the hardship I put other people through, and the way I ended up hating myself -- it all just wasn't worth it.

But on Swamp Thing, there was a real chemistry there. Not just between Alan, John and me; the editor, Karen Berger, was a big part of it. She put up with a lot of stuff that would have caused other editors to throw me off the book in a second. She's an exceptional editor. I stress that because I think that a lot of times the creators are given all the credit for the success of a book and the editors are ignored; the companies themselves have that attitude.

MC: Did she have any "input" -- sorry about that word -- in the scripts?

SB: You should talk to her; I'm sure you'll get some interesting stories. For a time, editing the series must have been very frustrating, because Alan, John and I knew exactly where we were going, and we were very secretive about some things.

MC: How far in ahead did you plan things out? I'm thinking of that Phantom Stranger appearance, in which he casually drops a reference to plotline Moore uses two years later.

SB: A lot of that's intuitive. You have an idea, and you can't forget it it, so you plant the seed. Later, it bears fruit. Alan always had a vision of the Phantom Stranger as a fallen angel; in fact, the first time he wrote the Stranger, in Annual #2, DC made him re-write dialogue that had made that point very explicit.

Getting back to Karen -- issue #29 wouldn't have happened without her. Originally, that issue was going to have the Nukeface story. In fact, Alan had turned in the first script for "The Nukeface Papers;" it was pretty much identical to the story that was eventually published. We were very attached to Nukeface, first, because he was John's character, and second, because we were very into the statement we were making. Karen read it, and she had no trouble with the story itself, but -- and this points out the importance of an editor -- she said that at this point we were building a readership. "Nukeface Papers" was like a funeral dirge; that story is slooooww. Karen felt that the story was good, but that this was a bad time for it. She felt that there had to be a real "punch" in the issues after the Demon trilogy, and #28, "The Burial."

Alan didn't come up with the idea for the Arcane story overnight; he'd been thinking in that direction for some time, but because of the deadline pressure, he had written that story pretty quickly -- two days, I think. And that fever-dream quality came out in the script. I'll never forget reading the script to issue #29; the hairs went up on the back of my spine. I called John and said "I can't believe he's doing this. . !" As a result, we were really inspired.

Working with Alan, the most important thing I learned about

doing horror comics is that the key to horror doesn't lie in showing things, but in letting the reader put the pieces together; and issue #29 is a textbook example of that. It wasn't until I drew the last page that I realized that the bodies were reanimated by insects -- and this is after drawing image after image of the dead walking around. It's there in the pictures; it's implied in the text -- but he never comes out and says it.

We were walking a fine line -- and John and I were damned aware of it -- of not going too far over the top prior to the point where Alan shows his hand. That point in #29 was the double-page spread, which is what lost us the Comics Code.

MC: That page? Not the pictures of Abby naked and bleeding?

SB: After they saw the double-page spread, they went back and read the book, and realised the implication of incest. . .

MC: The whole thing is a shopping list of every woman's secret fears. The ending implies gang-rape pretty strongly. . .

SB: And that's where we used every skill we had as artists to go completely over the top. We tried to go further than Alan had provoked us to. The whole issue is a build-up to that point. We went as far as we could go to exceed the horrors that the reader built up in his imagination. The unity of text and pictures pulls more out of the reader than either the art or text alone is capable of doing. That's the key to comics, and I can't think of many times when it's been as clear to me as that.

MC: That reminds me of the old experiment done by Eisenstein, or whoever the film-maker was -- you cut from a bowl of soup to a man's face, and the audience gets the idea that he's hungry. The film isn't really on screen; it takes place in your mind.

SB: Right. With comics it goes even further than that. You can pull examples from film, but they're not the same. Part of that association in film occurs because you're watching in real time: you look at the man's face for five seconds; you look at the bowl of soup for ten seconds -- the time span gives you the hunger. Comics are different; we can't control the time in which you read the text, or look at the pictures. There's something else that the reader brings to the comics, that an audience doesn't bring to film. I'm not saying that one medium is better than other, but I see a clear distinction that makes comics, as an art form, unique. It has different devices. But within the comics industry, we don't have adequate terms for what comics do. You and I are groping for terms using film as an example, because that's the closest thing we can think of for that thing in comics, because we haven't seen that thing often enough to have a name for it. But working with Alan on that issue, I saw what it was that made some comics important to me, and indeed, that inspired me to the point that I became obsessed with the medium. I still don't have a name for it. But all of the comics that are important right now -- **Dark Knight**, **Elektra**, **Watchmen**, **Swamp Thing** -- they're all pushing the perimeter of the language of comics.

SWAMP
THING

Issues
Joe Orlando

The Saga of the Swamp Thing #34
"Rite of Spring"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Steve Bissette and John Totleben
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza

Abby and the Creature start shacking up.

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Know comics? All right, try this little teaser: Think of an issue of any book that boasts more striking art than ST 34. Go ahead. Take your time. Tough, isn't it? Sort of like digging up an exception to the four-color map theorem.

This issue's artwork inspired some sticky-fingered individual to make off with the original pages, sparking Bissette and Totleben's well-publicized campaign for retrieval. The theft was reprehensible, of course, but I can understand the temptation. This stuff is gorgeous.

We don't often get to see imagery so surreal and imaginative, for few stories present the artists with such an open invitation to paint the town psychedelic. Abby eats one of ST's hallucinogenic tubers, which apparently is how you play hide-the-salaam during inter-kingdom courtship. In order to follow the resulting "trip," you have to turn the issue on its side (the first use of this technique?),and flip through tall, lush, gloriously freaky double-page spreads. Some of Moore's writing here is a bit too 1968 for my taste, some of it is downright poetic, and some of it -- well, I haven't figured out which category it falls into; there are sentences that begin with imagery worthy of Yeats, yet collapse into McKuenism by the time they hit the period. Moore uses stream-of-consciousness techniques to suggest that Abby and Alex have melded into the rest of nature: ". . .deep within us, rodents make love and wage war, with needle teeth that tear and small hearts that spill poppies on black earth scented with urine." Throughout, the story emphasizes both nature's beauty and its seeming callousness; as counterpoint to Abby and Swampy, we see frogs, birds and insects mating, nesting, killing, and eating. The reader half-expects Alan Watts to walk onstage and explain how it's all, like, one big beautiful dance.

I like best the way Moore writes the awkward, hesitant moments when the two declare their love, and the even more awkward moments immediately following. Ever notice that this is exactly the sort of scene that scares off most other writers, even them high-falutin' prize-winnin' novelists? Notice how they tend, on these occasions, to call for an abrupt curtain, or, genre permitting, to briskly segue into pornography? Most of us look to art for models of how to meet new experiences, but here art fails us; no wonder we never know what to say when we have to say the most important things. Moore protects the sensibilities of readers who might be offended by the idea that Abby would actually, so to speak, take root. He drops the pretense in later issues. Really, the Abby/Alec relationship doesn't represent anything new -- as far back as Roman times, ladies grew awfully affectionate toward a certain nettle called urtica pilulifera. This nasty-looking bit of shrubbery stung a bit, but on the other hand, it didn't leave underwear all over the house. Other veggies come to mind in this context.

The Saga of the Swamp Thing #35

"The Nukeface Papers, Part One"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Stephen Bissette and John Totleben
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza

ISSUES

Bob, a young transient, meets an old alcoholic in the woods. This fellow doesn't give his name, though others call him "Nukeface" because of his horribly deformed appearance. Nukeface calls Bob "Ed" -- to this old wino, everyone's his old drinking buddy Ed. Nukeface gives the younger man a taste of his hooch. Bob spits it out, then begins drooling and sweating and losing his teeth.

Nukeface, we learn, used to hang out at an abandoned nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania, and acquired a taste for radioactive waste. Apparently, the company that owned the plant stored the waste improperly as a cost-cutting measure. Worse still: the company, after a disaster in Pennsylvania, has now relocated in Louisiana and is dumping their evil wares in the bayous.

Bob dies. Nukeface, not noticing that "Ed" can no longer hear him, bids him farewell, and goes off to sniff out some more "juice," for his supplies are dwindling.

He comes across Swamp Thing (another "Ed" to Nukeface) and poisons the creature with his very touch. Nukeface worsens the situation by pouring his last drops of radioactive booze into ST's mouth. "There's glory for ya, huh?" says the gleefully glowing transient, blissfully ignoring the fact that this second "Ed" is also in his death throes.

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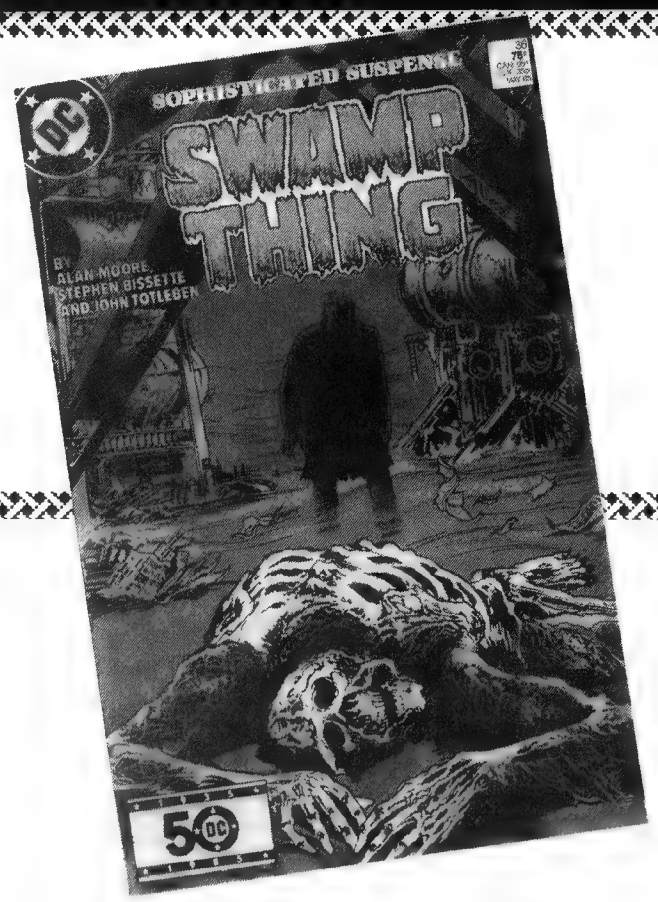
This two-parter has problems. The plot, to the extent that it has a plot (the two issues consist of little more than scenes of Nukeface poisoning people), has its fuzzy moments. I don't like the way characters suddenly develop psychic abilities whenever doing so conveniences the writer, and I don't understand how or why Nukeface and the company that inadvertently begat him both decide to hit the very same sunbelt locale at the same time. There's also a brief scene in which Swampy dreams that he's in NF's old Pennsylvania stomping grounds. This bit of business serves no narrative purpose; Moore's just throwing a sop to readers who insist on a certain number of pages featuring ST each month.

These are significant complaints, and I could name others. But we can overlook these quibbles pretty easily, for Moore (and John Totleben, who created the Nukeface character) has come up with a particularly effective metaphor to expose our nuclear sin, a metaphor so strong that it covers the story's weaknesses. Nukeface is Mr. Average Americano, well-meaning, sentimental, friendly, spouting endless cliches -- and completely unable to comprehend his addiction to toxins. He, and by implication we, are literally radioactivity alkies, and like all substance abusers, he and we live in a state of denial.

Nukeface continually bleats his pride in American citizenship (lower-class types tend to do that; when people have little else to be proud of they start crowing about accidents of birth), and never notices that he glows in the dark and that half his nose has fallen away and that each new "Ed" dies in agony. He excuses/explains himself in a choice bit of exposition: "Y'know, I was drinkin' this stuff for a coupla months 'fore I found out what it was. 'Waste.' That's what they call it. Waste from nuclear fishing. Supposed to be bad for ya. These days, everythin's supposed to be bad for ya. . . Who can keep up with all that health stuff, anyways?" Whereupon Nukeface launches into a defense of the nuclear industry. The best thing about this grimly hilarious speech (and this is what separates a Moore from, say, a Mantlo) is that it's allowed to stand on its own. Nukeface gives every reasonable pro-nuke argument you've ever heard (or, God help you, believed), and Moore feels no obligation to have some other character spew forth a rebuttle. After all, Nukeface's face -- not to mention "Ed's" horrible, blistering demise -- offers rebuttle enough. Here, once again, is Swamp Thing's lesson to aspiring comics writers: Don't say it -- show it. Here too, is a related lesson for agit-propers in whatever media: no matter how strong your feelings on a topic, resist the temptation to stack the deck or to underline for the dummies.



The Saga of the Swamp Thing #36
"The Nukeface Papers, Part Two"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Stephen Bissette and John Totleben
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza

The second part of this story is told Rashomon-style, with each participant (and a couple of mere bystanders) taking a page or two to give separate versions of events. I'll unite these synoptic accounts:

Nukeface, having mortally diseased Swamp Thing, trundles off in search of more "juice." He runs into young Billy Hatcher, who shouts "Nukeface!" at the old wino, who, in turn, scares the kid off. The nuclear junkie suffers a severe case of the DTs, and passes out.

Wallace Monroe, a guilt-stricken worker (in some unspecified capacity) for the nuclear power company, arrives in Louisiana and overhears Hatcher mentioning Nukeface to his friends. He recalls that a bum in Pennsylvania reputedly bore that appellation. A great many transients mysteriously died around the old Pensylvania dumping grounds; Monroe suspects that this Nukeface infected them, and has now gone travelling south.

Monroe's pregnant wife, Treasure (a naive fundamentalist), can't understand her husband's anxiety, or his guilt over the Pennsylvania dumpings, so he doesn't bother trying to explain to her why he wants to search the community for some sign of Nukeface. He's gone for some hours; when he returns to the motel, he discovers that Treasure has left to search for him.

Treasure finds Nukeface, sleeping in the swamps, apparently ill. "What would Jesus Christ have done?" she asks herself. She drapes her coat over the monster, and prays over him throughout the night. Next morning, she listens for a heartbeat, decides that the poor fellow has gone to meet his Maker, and wanders off, running into her husband and a police search party. She tells of her night's experiences. Everyone backs off and her husband runs away, for she has exposed both herself and her unborn baby to deadly radiation.

Abby comes across Alec, who hasn't much longer to live. He explains that he is going to send his consciousness "into the green" in hopes of regrowing himself. He then dies.

Well, not really -- not permanently. Nor did Nukeface, who wakes up, and continues his search for more toxic substances to slake his unquenchable thirst. "Heads up, America," he cries. "Here I come!"

****

Now this plot turns (and twists and turns and twists and turns) on one very unlikely event -- that two bands of boys, in both Pennsylvania and Louisiana, would hit upon the name Nukeface, as opposed to some other childish calumny. The story also depends upon NF and Monroe reaching Louisiana more-or-less simultaneously. One must, furthermore, arch an eyebrow when Monroe dopes out Nukeface's origins without very much evidence.None of this convinces, and the story's highly intricate and interesting structure can't do much to disguise the barrage of unbelievabilities. There are nice touches: rotted fruit that starts plopping whenever Nukeface walks by, the carefully-designed experiments in narrative form, and the bits of actual newsprint (bearing real-life tidings of nuclear horror) which float through both issues. This last touch is particularly inventive; aesthetically, it emphasizes the flatness of the page (which should score Bissette and Totleben a few points with the fine-arts crowd), while thematically it disallows us from dismissing the work as simple fantasy.

The full-page view of Wallace fleeing from his wife is genuinely moving. Treasure's a necessary adjunct to the Nukeface metaphor; this country is filled to overflowing with good-hearted dunderheads just like her, who got their Christianity out of a cathode-ray tube and who haven't the smarts to realize when they've been victimized. Despite her extreme naivete, you never feel contempt toward her, and you can't view her fate cynically.

The Saga of the Swamp Thing #37

"Growth Patterns"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Rick Veitch and John Totleben
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza

ISSUES

A seed grows. Leaves shoot out. A woman waters it. Weeks pass; the plant grows further. It forms a mouth. Then it forms eyes. It starts to talk. The leaves turn into arms. And the plant turns into Swamp Thing.

London: A mysterious fellow named John Constantine (who looks a lot like the rock star Sting, though he dresses rather more conservatively) meets a green-haired punkette acquaintance in a nightclub. She mentions something about "a massive intergalactic energy field that got drawn into a black hole eight billion years ago" and is now coming back. Constantine seems to take this warning seriously.

Wisconsin: Constanine meets with another of his "operatives," an overweight stutterer named Benjamin Cox who concurs that something bad is brewing. But he prefers to believe that it's H.P. Lovecraft's famed monster Cthulhu who's slated for a return appearance within the year.

Washington: Constantine meets Sister Anne-Marie, a craggy old nun, who insists that "the name of our adversary is Satan."

New York: Constantine wakes up in the apartment of Emma, an artist, who tells him that unnamed forces in South America are engineering the great evil Whatzit's return, by raising the general "belief level."

Louisiana: Constantine shows up in the back seat of Abby's car. He knows all about Swampy and his girlfirend; moreover, he claims to know more about ST than does the creature himself -- for example, he knows that Swampy can regrow himself anywhere in the world, in a sort of instant transport system. If Swampy wants further enlightenment, he is to meet Constantine in Rosewood, a small town outside of Chicago.

Back in New York: a creature called the Invunche, who wears his head backwards and whose arm is sown to his spine, shows up in Emma's loft and tosses her out the window.

****

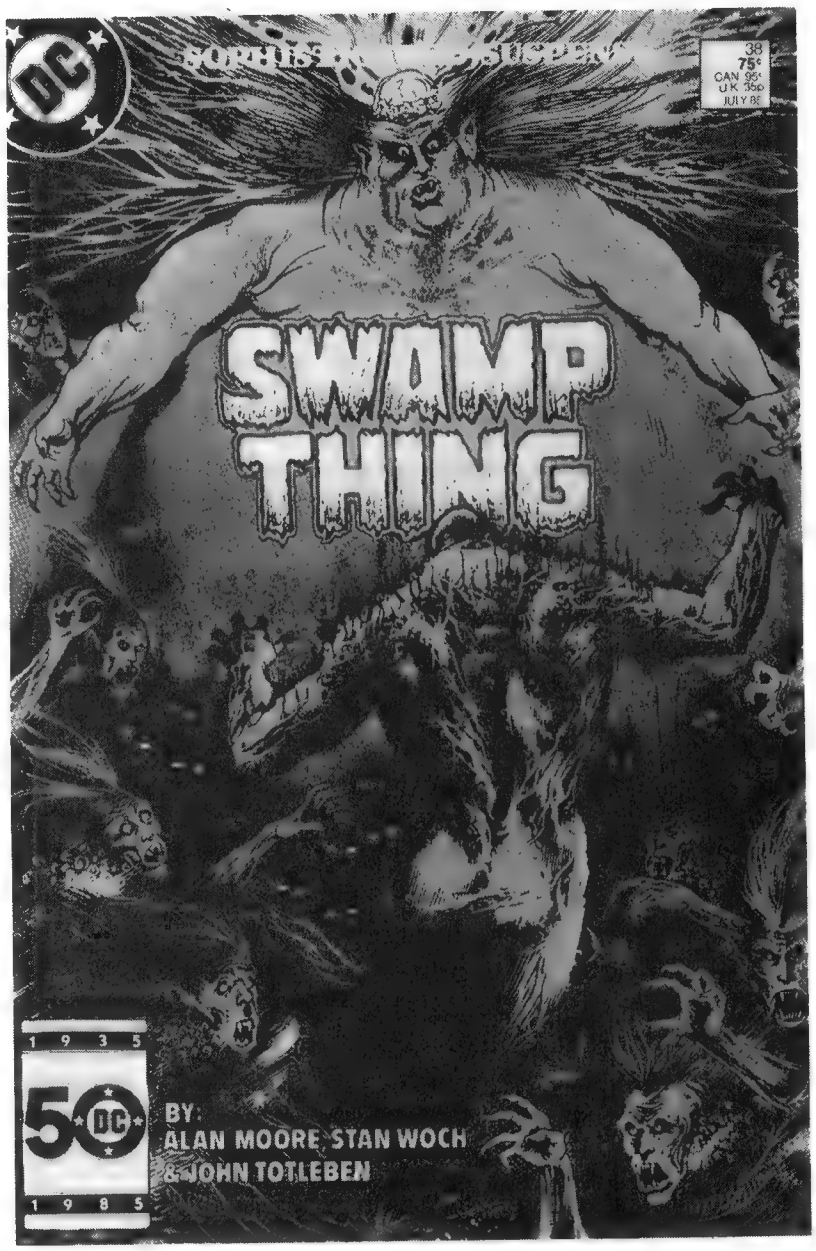
This last bit serves no real purpose -- it's a pro forma scare; Moore probably felt that he couldn't let an entire issue pass by without popping up and saying "boo." That aside, I like this issue. I like best the scenes of Abby "re-growing" her new boyfriend, which, in a way, is exactly what the womenfolk do for us fellows. Though we rarely admit it.

I'm fond of Constantine, too; he may be the most interesting supporting character Moore's come up with. Come to think of it, he may be the only major character in the series entirely of Moore's invention. (Well, Chester Williams, who will first show his face in issue 43, seems to be cropping up fairly often, so I guess he's a major addition to the cast too.) We never get the full lowdown on Constantine's origins, and I hope we never do, but we know this much: 1. Constantine doesn't seem to have any money worries. 2. Though he uses Cockney idioms, he mingles pretty well with people of all classes. 3. He knows everybody. 4. He's heavily involved in things supernatural, and his host of contacts keeps him abreast of events on the other side. 5. He acts supremely cool and confident, yet has his limits, and a breaking point. 6. Though he deals in far-fringe occultism, he likes to describe his exploits in terms appropriate to a spy operation, thereby providing the series with a faintly hilarious running gag. It's especially amusing when he refers to Swampy as a "bloody amateur" -- as opposed to Constantine's usual coterie of professional "operatives."

So who is Constantine? He comes on like a heavy. He lies, threatens, insults, leads people on, smokes incessantly, chases women, cracks extremely grim jokes, and probably has even worse vices. Yet he seems to be, in the final analysis, on the side of the angels. He bears the names of both the foremost Apostle and the first Christian emperor. . .and, of course, those initials are awfully resonant.

The Saga of the Swamp Thing #38
"Still Waters"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Stan Woch and John Totleben
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza



Despite Abby's protests, Swamp Thing sends himself into the green and off to Rosewood.

Seems the town has a problem with vampires; in fact, Swampy once ran into these very same creatures, whom he thought destroyed by a sudden flood. Alas, they simply became mer- vampires, underwater acolytes for a grossly obese vampire queen. they've formed communities, where they can breed and feed local Rosewoodians to their young. Constantine convinces ST to take a dive and "clean up the mess" he left last time

****

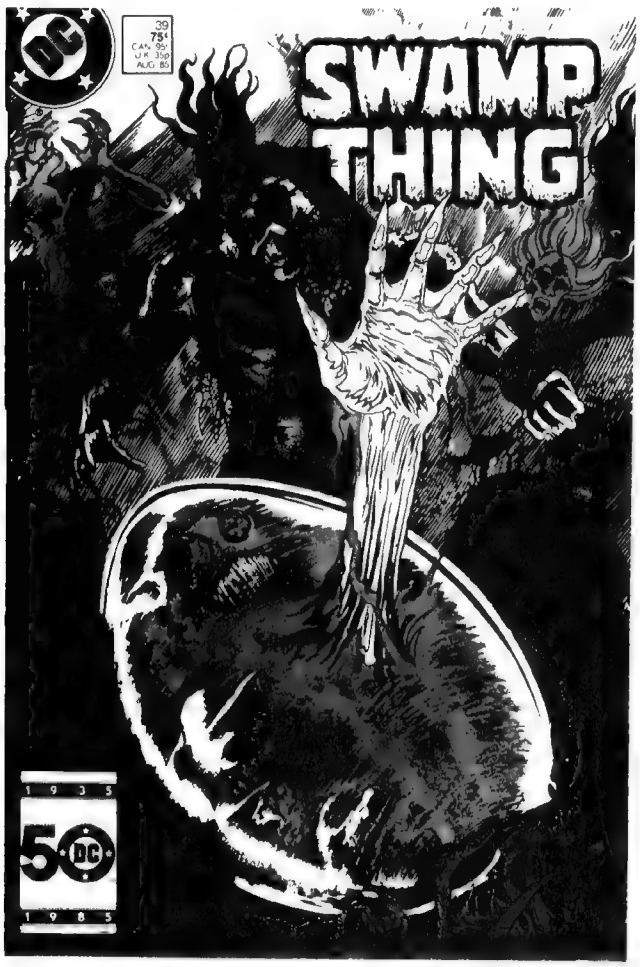
You know, I've not much to say about this issue. No great problems crop up here -- there are no plotholes or lapses in craft. The monsters are nicely repellent, and the by-play between ST and Constantine always amuses. Compared with most films on the vampire theme, this story's a great deal more inventive and audacious, and Constantine's little lesson on vampire biology is rather ingenious.

But, I dunno -- when all's said and done, this two-parter is just a comic book. During the preceding half-dozen-or-so issues, we got used to something more. The Nukeface story, for example, may have been imperfectly constructed, but it had a genuine force to it. This one's just, y'know, there.

This issue marks, of course, the real beginning (if we consider 37 the prologue) of the "American Gothic" storyline, Moore's challenge to himself, in which he tries to breathe new life into all of the standard "horror" cliches -- vampires, werewolves, walking dead and so forth. During Moore's first year-and-a-half on the book, he apparently felt that these themes wouldn't work in today's world. Now he seems determined to bloody well make them work. The results vary in quality.

The Saga of the Swamp Thing #39
"Fish Story"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Stephen Bissette and John Totleben
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza



The Vampire queen has released innumerable eggs, and the eggs hatch into a horrifying, entirely new sort of creature. ST watches as these creatures battle for primacy; soon, only one remains -- a hideous nine-foot long-toothed quasi-reptilian, which swims off to water's edge. There, it devours a handful of townsfolk. Swampy sinks into the green, expands his consciousness to take command of an entire mountainside, causes an earthquake, and sends the entire underwater community crashing into the valley below. The monsters are destroyed.

Constantine's not pleased: He wanted the creatures done away with quietly. Now, everyone will believe in vampires just a little bit more, thereby raising the general "belief level," thereby hastening the great black Whatzit's arrival.

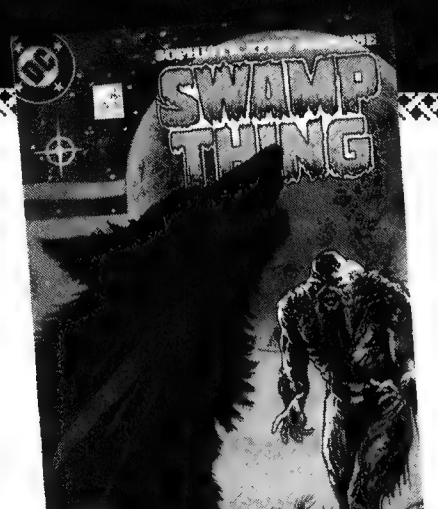
* * * *

Now, this "belief level" business deserves a closer examination. Remember, one of the givens in these stories is that vampires, ghosts, werewolves and so forth actually exist. But the ground rules are more complicated than that. Moore posits a universe in which vampires, f'rinstance, really are there -- but then he tells us that we mortals are better off thinking they aren't. Otherwise, we raise the "belief level," which apparently refers to knowledge, not superstition.

I don't get it. I could understand how a general upsurge in blind superstition, in irrationality, might be considered a harbinger of still greater evils. But what's the harm in believing in vampires when, according to the rules of this game, vampires really exist? Why do chinks in our ignorance of such matters threaten to upset the balance of the universe? How does this pave the way for the Great Evil Thingie that threatens to devour us all? Why does. . .

Oh, why bother asking? You know why. As they say on the Letterman show, "It's just a gimmick." Alan Moore just wants to write a vampire story, and a werewolf story, and a haunted house story, and a zombie story, and he wants to connect all these revamped horror classics with a much larger story that he has planned for later on. The connections are frayed, which usually happens when you settle for quick-and-dirty jerryrigging. Best to ignore altogether the connections between episodes, and concentrate on the individual stories.

This particular story's pretty good; it doesn't really send me, but still. . .pretty good. Swampy here discovers just how powerful he truly is. Starting with this issue, he's no longer just "The Creature;" he's an arboreal deity, which fits in pretty nicely with Moore's conception of comics as modern-day mythology. By making his protagonist immensely powerful, Moore opens doors to stories we never thought possible. But perhaps he closes doors, as well. There's only so much you can do with omnipotent characters.



Swamp Thing #40
"The Curse"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Stephen Bissette and John Totleben
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza

Kennescook, Maine: Ages ago, the Pennamaquot Indians kept menstruating women in a hut called "the red lodge," where they were treated like lepers. Similar oppression of women continues to this day; a housewife named Phoebe (whose house stands on the very grounds of a red lodge) feels trapped by the unthinking, institutionalized anti-female bigotry that surrounds her. Being a comic book character, she expresses her rage by becoming a werewolf. The lycanthropic lady spends a few pages snorting and snarling and shredding things apart, until Swampy shows up for the requisite battle scene. Then the oppressed wolf-woman decides that her only real escape from a sexist society and housefrau drudgery is to swan-dive into a store display rack filled with silver-plated steak knives. ****

Yes, you read right: a display rack filled with steak knives, all pointing out. Uh-huh. Listen, Mr. Moore, I don't know how grocers set up their wares on your side of the pond, but I've never seen such an asinine point-of-purchase presentation in any American supermarket. Yet this unlikely device represents only the smallest flake of bullshit when compared to the issue as a whole, which gives us the entire cowflop.

"The Curse" refers to the insulting slang term for menstruation, to the curse of lycanthropy, and to the curse of being a woman in a man's world. I know all this because I read the story, which makes these points crystal clear, but for those who excel at misinterpreting the obvious, Moore painfully spells out his multiple meanings in issue #46's letters column. He felt obliged to do so because some ninneys didn't read "The Curse" as pro-feminist and decided that Moore "implies that menstruation turns women into raving maniacs and fallen depressives." Mr. Moore, there's something I've got to tell you about us folks here in the colonies. We like being outraged. Self-righteous anger provides an undeniable high, and we're the world's leading addicts; to get our fix, we will intentionally misread any "topical" work, even one that conforms with our own ideology. Remember how black leaders damned ***The Color Purple*** as a "racist" film -- until Oscar ignored it, at which point it miraculously became a responsible piece of movie- m ing, and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and ences became the "racist" bar sinisters? We dig indi tion; we dig it a hell of a lot more than consistency or ic. As the King James translators remind us in their dom-reprinted preface, "cavil, if it find no hole, s make one." Trying to plug such holes after the fact loser's game; there will always be dolts who insis reading Swift's **A Modest Proposal** as a cookbo and these people do not deserve a response. For rest of us -- the ones capable of spotting a theme hasn't been underlined and printed in red ink -- " Curse" is a strongly pro-feminist work. Too strongly fact. No, I'm not saying that this story is too feminis that it's possible for any work to be too feminist; rat I'm suggesting that the writer serves his cause ill by s ping the reader upside the head. This "Curse" car escape the curse of didacticism. (Moore must be sh ing his shaggy noggin right now: he was too subtle Mindy Newall, too blatant for Martin Cannon.)

Poor Phoebe views every atom of her universe as affliction, and we are meant to share this view. The permarket oppresses her. Her husband and his frie are insufferable male- chauvinist boors. The local p nography dealership offers unspeakable horrors. some reason, Moore even uses her feminine napkins totems of Woman's subjugation. Phoebe has also r of the red lodge and its attendant evils.

Jerry Falwell, certain feminists (thank God, not all), this issue of Swamp Thing all try to convince us t "violence against women" is standard fare at the lo sex shop. But it isn't. It just isn't. The violence-again women rap is a smokescreen for old-fashioned purit ism; people uncomfortable with their own sexual sires have latched onto unfounded assertions some trendy, pseudo-feminist lingo to justify foist their sexual paranoia onto everybody else.

So why does Moore's wolf-woman go crash through the porn- shop window? Because he's a both a striking image and an easy target. If he wanted create a truly feminist work (and I think it's fair to assu

that such was his intention here), Phoebe would have been a single mother struggling against the feminization of poverty, and the were-Phoebe would jump through other windows entirely -- she would pounce, say, on employers who refuse to promote women. Unwarranted, these problems don't lend themselves very easily to melodrama, to visual presentation, or to stories about werewolves. But if Moore sought to show us modern analogues to the red lodges of yesteryear, he shouldn't have wasted so much time on cliches.

Let us switch from the hoary to the hairy. How and why does Phoebe become a werewolf? The symbolic reasons are obvious, but the narrative also has to work on the nuts-and-bolts level. Tradition tells us werewolfery results from heredity, dabbling in black magic, surviving a werewolf's attack, or some similar source. Phoebe's lycanthropy seems to have something to do with the Pennamaquot indians, though I'm not sure whether Moore refers to their tribal practices merely to lend it a thematic note or because they bear directly on the storyline.

(Speaking of our Pennamaquot friends: One Mike Norwitz, of Scottsdale, Arizona, took umbrage at the way Moore dealt with the red lodge. Mr. Norwitz was annoyed by "the (common) assumption on the part of Anglos that Amerindian psychology is identical to Western-European psychology," and he furthermore insists that, before we foolishly condemn the red lodge, we should review it in the proper context, and obtain the proper anthropological background. No doubt. No doubt that indians of yore, unlike Europeans of yore, were incapable of silly traditions. "There are more things in Heaven and Earth," Norwitz reminds us, "than are dealt with in your Western-European philosophy." Damn straight. F'rinstance, I've always thought that once we narrow-minded westerners rid ourselves of our imperialistic, capitalistic cultural biases, we will see the beauty and profundity of suttee and similar practices.)

In sum: Despite the wonderful art, and despite nice patches of dialogue (Abby has some terrific lines on page 5), "The Curse" is the worst ST story Moore has ever written (excepting only #46, a "Crisis" issue which seems to have been foisted on him).

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Addendum: I just had a very interesting conversation with Steve Bissette, in which he heard, and countered, many of the above complaints. (I should mention that the basic idea for "The Curse" came from Steve.) He points out that ignorant notions of "woman's place" still prevail in out-of-the way locales like Kennescook, and that he's seen all sorts of psychological (and actual) wife abuse in rural areas. Well Steve, I've seen it too, even out here in with-it L.A., but I would nevertheless contend that by now the ubiquitous TV must have given every American woman, even countrified housewives like Phoebe, the basic outlines of feminism. I still say that she was warned. Steve also pointed out (more for the benefit of the Mindy Newalls than the Martin Cannons) that Phoebe was supposed to be a woman, not Everywoman. Quite right; there's nothing I despise more than the modern tendency to see every protagonist as a role model or group spokesman. But really, Moore and Bissette don't make Phoebe stand out as an individual; we don't learn, say, her tastes in music, her verbal tics, whether she collects unusual pepper shakers, etc. She's something of a blank. So there's a strong temptation to see her not as one woman, but as Woman.

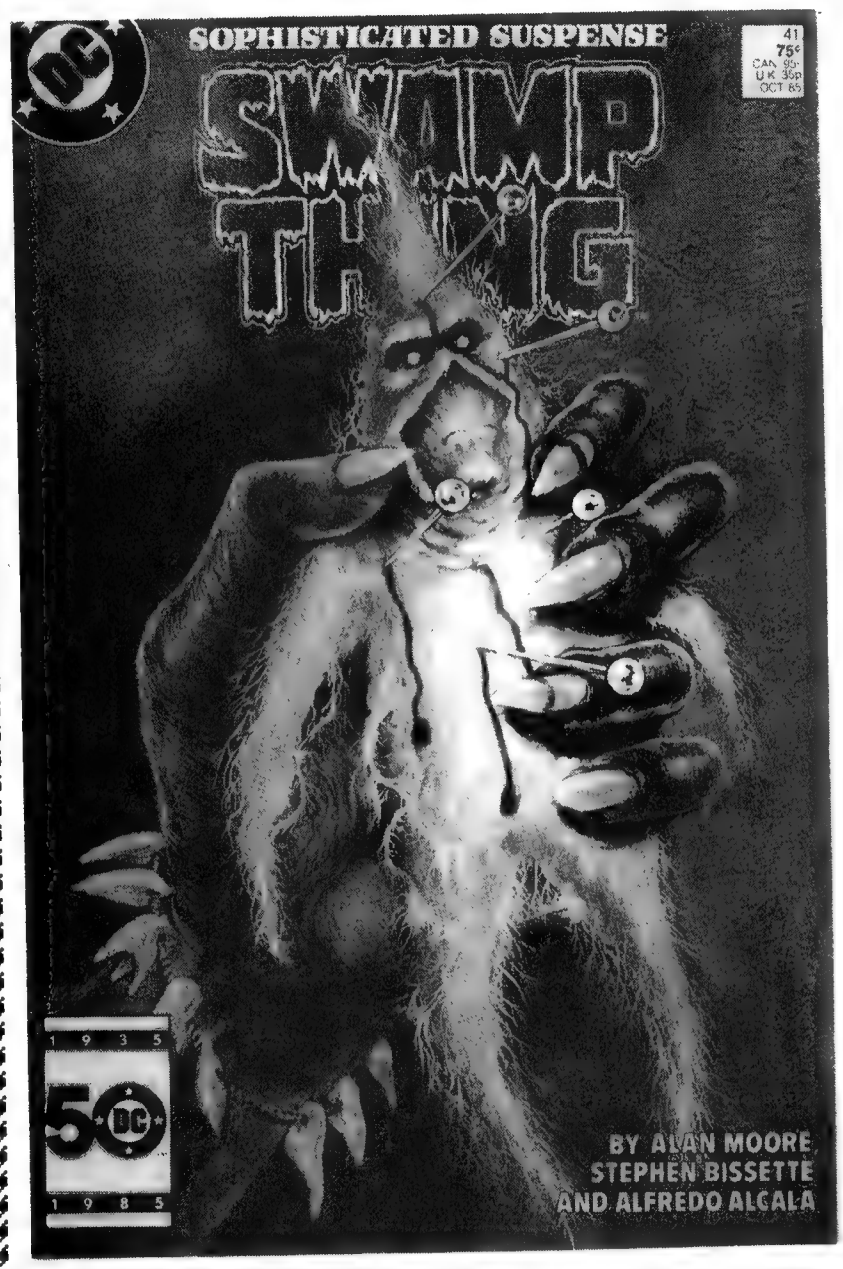
And incidentally, Steve, what's your explanation for that anti-porn tirade? You've expressed an affection for the cinema of John Waters; how did your nose get so blue? For yea, verily, my prophecy has come to pass: The morality-mongers have indeed come after Swamp Thing.

A final point. When I wrote the above review, I assumed that Mindy Newall was just a reader, only to later discover that she's a comics professional of wide experience and genuine talent. That's what happens when you kick the comics habit for a decade or so -- upon your return, you run into scads of new names, and you spend a year or more saying "Who dat?" I'm sorry, Ms. Newall, that I didn't recognize you. But I won't retract my opinion.

Swamp Thing #41

"Southern Change"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Stephęn Bissette and Alfredo Alcala
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza



Constantine has informed ST that the next manifestation of the great coming evil will occur in Lousiana. As it happens, a film crew has commandeered a decaying plantation to use as a backdrop in a new mini-series, set in the antebellum era. We meet three of the actors: Angela Lamb (a Joan Collins-type), Richard Deal (an Alan Alda-type) and Billy Carlton (a black actor, perhaps based on Richard Pryor). Lamb is a racist bitch, Deal's a whining liberal, and Carlton's a cocaine addict with a chip on his shoulder. Lamb hates Carlton and sleeps with Deal; Deal tries to be Carlton's friend; Carlton hates them both. These personalities, once established, are soon discarded. Seems the dead are restless around Jackson mansion; the shades of a former plantation-owner, his wife, and her slave-lover, begin to take over the personalities of the three actors. Angela Lamb forgets her bigotry, and starts an affair with Carlton; Deal discovers them, and, at issue's close, is about to extract a bloody revenge -- just as the former slave owner did.

****

ST has precious little to do with all of the above (Abby, who has taken a flunky position with the crew, provides his only connection with these events; she senses something evil in the air). Some readers may bewail the fact that this book's title character often plays only bit parts, but I like the fact that Moore feels free to relegate ST to the background; after all, some of Will Eisner's best Spirit stories gave us barely a glimpse of the big blue guy with the mask.

Stories much like "Southern Change" appeared on television just about every week in the early-to-mid-'70s -- usually on ***Night Gallery*** or as some made-for-TV movie. "Occult"-oriented projects were big then, and so were movies about moviemaking. Though Moore plays in the same graveyard as those cheesy old television "epics" (and Christ, do they look hokey in reruns!), his work occupies a somewhat higher level. He's simply a much better writer than most teevee hacks. His grasp o

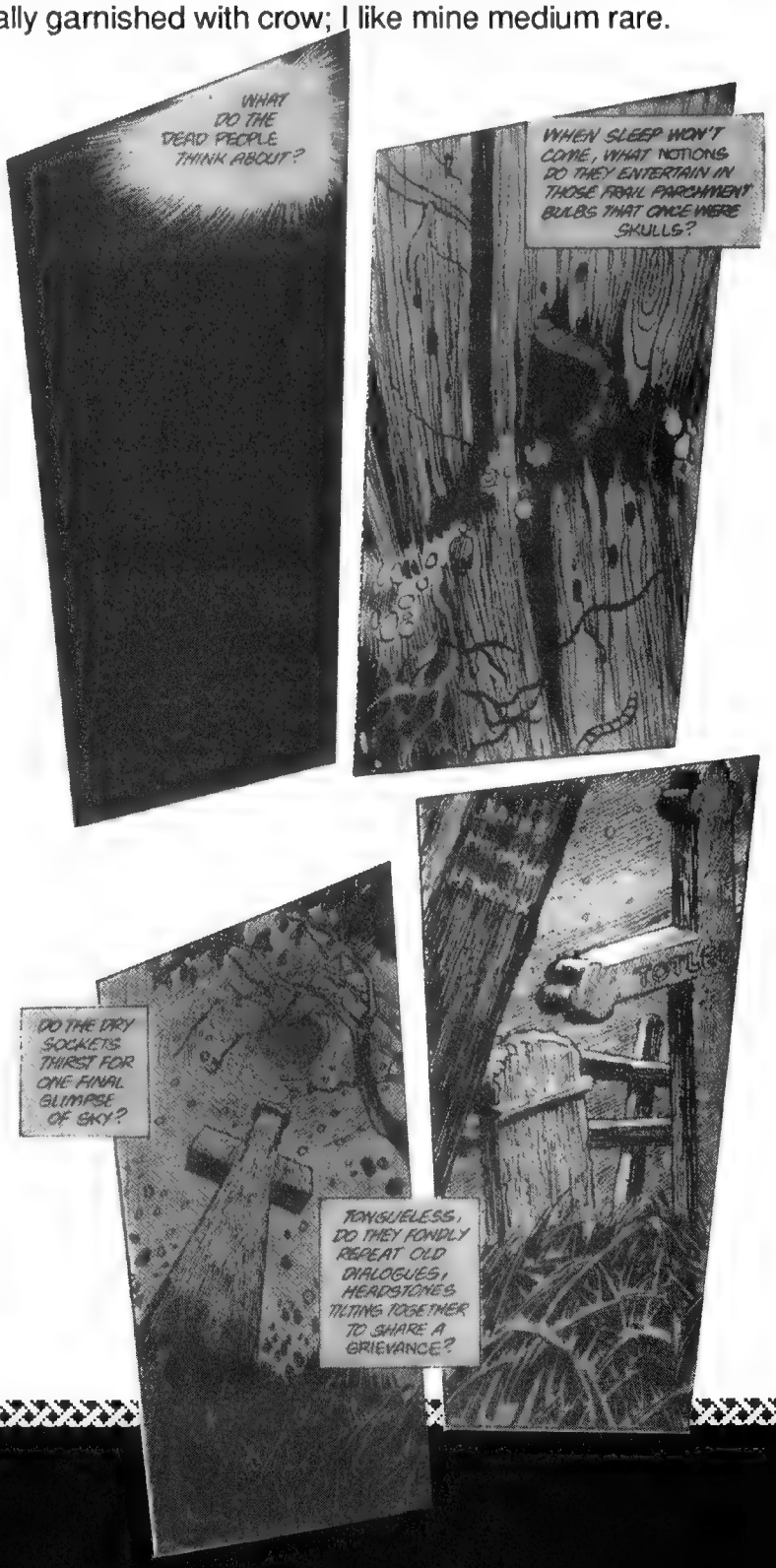
movie- industry lingo may not be quite perfect, but he uses it more confidently than many a writer in the industry itself. Moore sometimes ladles on character exposition with a trowel (as when Richard Deal patronisingly addresses Carlton as "Billy, my man!"), but generally he handles these matters with a sure, subtle touch. Best, he never directly tells us (through dialogue or captions) that dead slaves possess the modern-day extras, or that dead slavemasters now control the lead actors; we have to figure these things out for ourselves. And I very much like the by-play between Abby and ST.

Still; there's something about Moore's way with black characters, both here and in **Miracleman**, that doesn't quite sit well. Not that his writing carries any tinge of racism (though the Willful Misreaders, that pesky group I mentioned earlier, may think otherwise.) But Moore rarely assigns blackness to a character capriciously; blacks generally show up in Moore's fiction only when their race is somehow necessary to thematic or narrative development. His black people are Black People, not black people.

Bissette and Alcala contribute some interesting art in this issue. I find it instructive to compare Totleben's inking in the next issue with Alcala's work here. Hold page 4 of issue 41 next to page 5 of issue 42, and you'll see the differences and similarities. Both inkers use delicate hatching marks to "mould" faces and create grey areas; Totleben's work may appear, at first glance, to be the more detailed, but his lines are actually thicker than Alcala's. Alcala uses a less schematic approach; his linework is freer, and he includes some cross-hatching. Which is better -- Totleben's careful "engraved" approach, with its marvellously subtle gradations, or Alcala's looser, scritchy- scratchy technique, which may do a better job of capturing the feel of Bisette's pencils? Most days, I much prefer the former, but both styles have their aficionados.

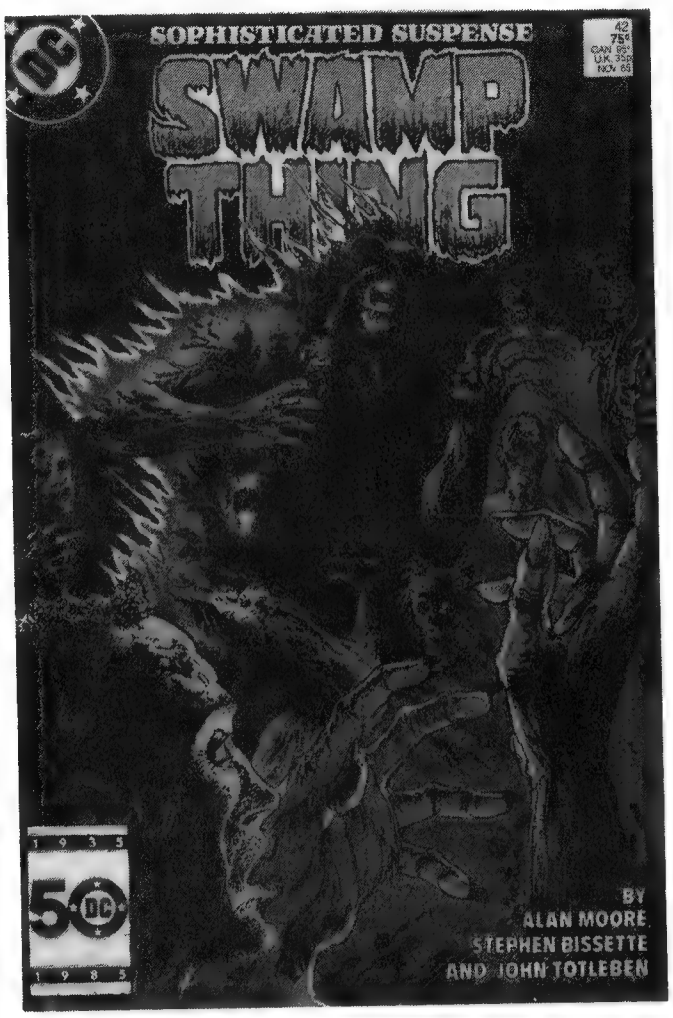
****

Addendum: Er. . .about that paragraph concerning Moore's use of black characters: I wrote it before reading **Watchmen** #6, which prominently features a black character whose race is thoroughly incidental to the storyline. Sorry, Mr. Moore. That'll be one order of hat, liberally garnished with crow; I like mine medium rare.


WHAT DO THE DEAD PEOPLE THINK ABOUT?
WHEN SLEEP WON'T COME, WHAT NOTIONS DO THEY ENTERTAIN IN THOSE FRAIL PARCHMENT BULBS THAT ONCE WERE SKULLS?
DO THE DRY SOCKETS THIRST FOR ONE FINAL GLIMPSE OF SKY?
TONGUELESS, DO THEY FONDLY REPEAT OLD DIALOGUES, HEADSTONES TILTING TOGETHER TO SHARE A GRIEVANCE?

Swamp Thing #42
"Strange Fruit"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Bissette, Totleben and Randall
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza



Dead slaves rise from their graves, to play out a drama that had been first performed in 1842: a plantation owner, after skinning his wife's black lover, was attacked by slaves; he fired into the crowd; they overwhelmed him. Swamp Thing decides that the only way he can stop this grim piece of theatre from endlessly repeating itself is to burn down the mansion.

****

A nice little issue, which delivers an effective metaphor for racial tensions in this country. Moore and Bissette tell us that hatred and tragedy are cyclical, and that the oppressed will only know freedom once that cycle is broken.

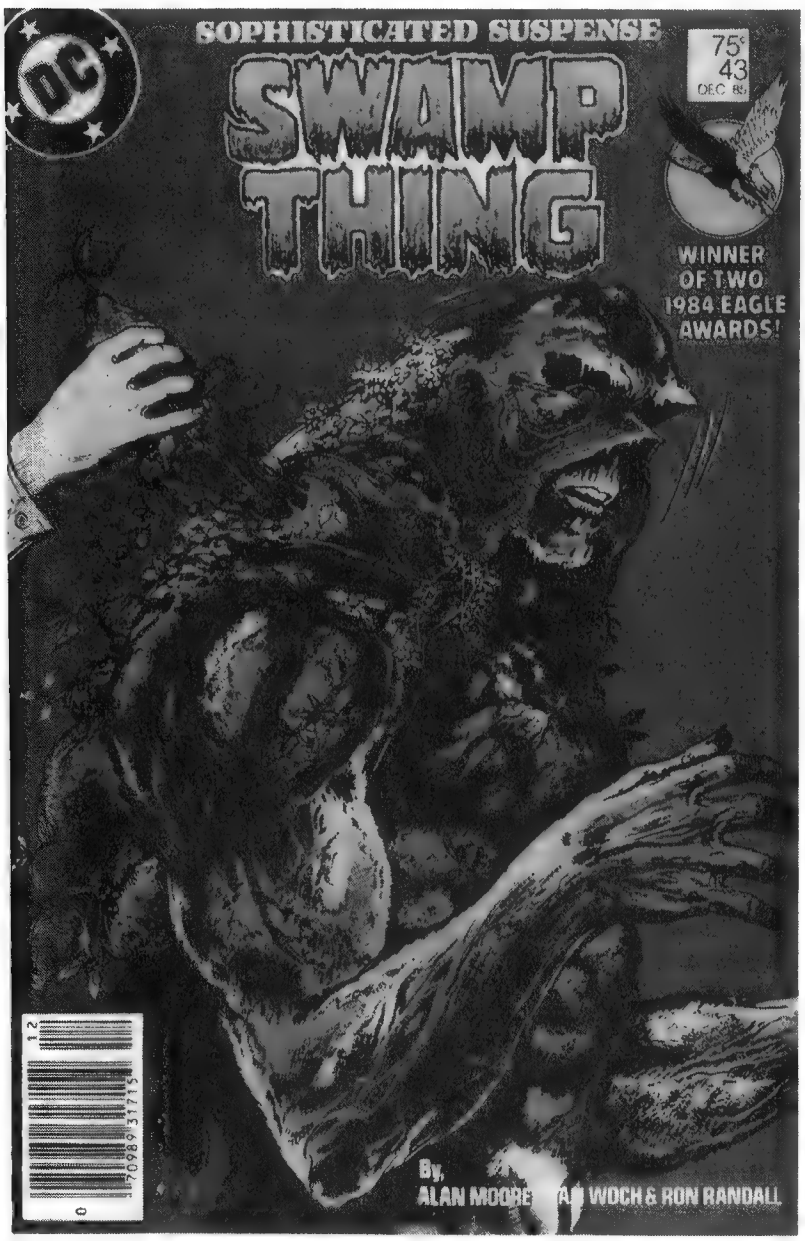
Your high school English teacher would probably snicker if you told him that you found some truly artful prose in a comic book story about zombies battling a Swamp Thing -- but, fact is, there are some memorable, and even moving passages here. I especially like the first page, which gives us the "thoughts" of a decaying corpse in its grave: "(A decade counting the nails, over and over; a decade studying the growth of a single fungus; fifty years trying to remember what peaches smelled like. . . generation after generation of beetles pass before your unblinking gaze. You watch the rise and decline of their miniature dynasties, making up names for each character, often repeating yourself. . .)" At first, I suspected Moore had cribbed a line or two from Stanley Elkin's terrific short story, The Bottom Line (which, surprisingly enough, deals with an exactly similar situation), but a check confirmed that everything here is Moore's own, and is just as clever as what Elkin concocted. And the epilogue, better seen than described, will make even the most sullen reader laugh out loud.

Determining which of this issue's pages belong to Ron Randall isn't exactly the challenge of the century, even though he tries his best to do Totleben. I liked his work better in issue 33, when he did Ron Randall. Still, seeing Bissette inked by quite different inkers is, perhaps, the second-best way of getting an idea of how the underlying pencils must have looked. (The first-best way would be to see the pencils themselves, before the inking stage. Alas, comic book technology does not usually permit this.) Bissette's layouts are always striking, never more so than on pages 7-9, in which he creates an increasingly violent mood through the use of jagged panels.

Swamp Thing #43
"Windfall "

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Stan Woch and Ron Randall
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza

ISSUES



Chester Williams, an unregenerate, aging hippie, discovers one of ST's hallucinogenic yams in the swamp, takes it home, and studies it; he suspects that it might have psychedelic properties. He divides it into three parts. One he gives to a friend, whose wife is painfully dying of cancer. The other he gives to a decrepit creature named Milo, and. . .

****

Nope. Ain't gonna tell ya. I provide synopses of these stories to jog your memory or to plug holes in your collection. But if you've ever read ST #43, then you certainly can't have forgotten it by now -- and if you haven't read it, then hie thee to the comics shop and hand the acne-ridden creature behind the counter the meagre two-or-three bills he'll ask for. And then find a snug sofa, or park bench, or fast-food booth, anyplace where interruption does not threaten, and read, and enjoy. You'll experience Stan Woch's nicest art and a story that could convert the most stubborn comics-haters among your acquaintances. This is one of the best comic books ever published. End of review.

Swamp Thing #44
"Bogeymen"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Steve Bissette and John Totleben
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza

A trucker gets drunk with a new acquaintance, whom we never see (this issue makes heavy use of POV -- point-of-view, or subjective -- camera angles). He asks the trucker to "think of a number between one and 164." The unseen companion connects each number with a pair of eyes, which he describes in gushing, romantic terms; we believe that he's referring to 164 sexual conquests. In fact, he's talking about something else entirely. He drives the trucker home, takes out a length of wire, and strangles the fellow: "One hundred and sixty-five."

Our friend is a serial killer, or "bogeyman" as he likes to call himself, and he tells us (via an interior monologue) that he's not alone -- he knows folks "who like the stuff I like" all over the country: "They move from state to state, meeting up occasionally, trading stories. . . In Portland I heard about a guy who'd done 650! Awesome." Swamp Thing finds the trucker's body, and chases this "bogeyman" into a pit of quicksand.

****

Some stories are loose and open-ended; some are tight and self-contained. "Bogeymen" clearly belongs in the second category, which is why I felt a bit irked by the pages devoted to keeping the overall "American Gothic" storyline going. This tale about a serial killer is almost killed by being part of a serial.

Despite that reservation, I'm quite impressed by this issue. Through the use of subjective angles and first-person, present tense narration, Moore and Bissette turn the reader into the killer. Compare Moore's methods here to the tactics used in the Friday the 13th films and similar fare. Those celluloid obscenities pretend to view the killer as a monster, as the rampaging Other -- yet the film-makers invariably encourage the audience to find glee in monster's atrocities, especially when his victims take the form of The Boss Who Insulted You, or The Peers Who Despised You, or (most frequently) The Beautiful Girl Who Snubbed You. Moore uses an exactly converse strategy. He emphasizes audience identification with his "Bogeyman," yet allows us no perverse pleasures -- atrocity remains atrocious; victims remain victims; we do not revel when they "get it." Irresponsible film-makers like Sean Cunningham and Wes Craven are the true pornographers (though society refuses to recognize this fact: show images of knife-in-woman and you'll get a "tsk-tsk;" show penis-in-woman and you'll get an Attorney General's report) because they trade in sadism; in contrast, Moore and Bissette force us recognize that sadism without allowing us to smile at it.

Well, to be truthful, this issue contains a few smiles. Moore has a weakness for black humour, and one really can't resist the occasional grim wit here, especially when the "Bogeyman" refers to mini-conventions of serial killers, and complains about the media attention given "losers" like Manson and Speck, who didn't even get into treble figures. The overall mood, however, is far from jolly, and the storytellers never allow us a perverse envy of the murderer's lot.

I question one bit of science here. At one point, the killer explains that he did away with his first victim using ground glass in a cup of coffee. Actually, ingesting ground glass (as opposed to glass shards) is pretty harmless -- at least, such was the conclusion of Sir Thomas Browne, an eighteenth-century physician who fed his pooch "about a dram" of "subtilly powdered" glass, to no ill effect. Not that I'd eat or drink or serve the stuff, y'understand; one shouldn't trust the science of the 1700s, and I've no information as to whether Browne's experiment has been replicated in modern times. Kids, don't try this trick at home -- unless you bear a particularly strong grudge toward the family hound.

Swamp Thing #45
"Ghost Dance"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Stan Woch and Alfredo Alcala
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza

ISSUES

Amy Cambridge inherited a fortune gleaned from the sales of Cambridge rifles; a superstitious woman, she believed that she had to devote her life to building a house massive enough to hold the troubled spirits of all who fell by the weapon that bore her name. She died decades ago, but the spirits live on -- and are witnessed by four present-day visitors: David (a Wally Cox-type), his wife Linda (a blond bombshell), David's friend Rod (Mr. Macho) and his wife Judy (Ms. Mousie). Poor, cuckolded David refuses to recognize the obvious fact that Rod and Linda are getting it on behind his back; as soon as they can, the adulterous couple sneak off to one of the mansion's many bedrooms. . .where their dalliance is interrupted by the dead. Scores of spirits attack the two couples; Swamp Thing (blundering onto the scene for no particular reason) manages to save only David and Linda. Linda blurts out that Rod was her lover, and wishes that he, not her husband, had survived. Next day, David purchases a Cambridge rifle.

***

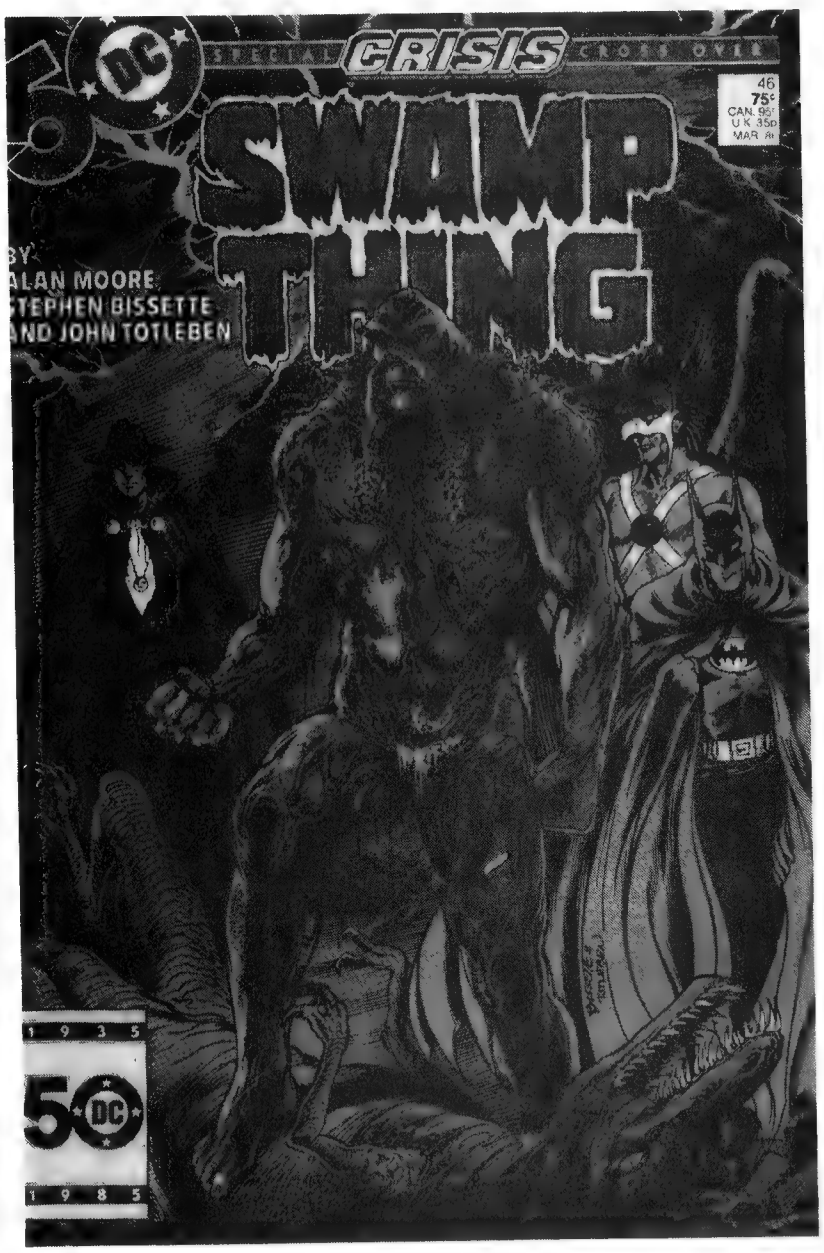
Anyone up on American spook-house lore will instantly recognize the Cambridge mansion as San Jose's Winchester Mystery House, the most famous "haunt" in California -- perhaps in the hemisphere (if you don't count the White House!). And anyone conversant with comic book history will recognize the two couples in this story: they're straight out of the old EC horror stories, whose protagonists always seemed to be involved in tawdry affairs, and who always saw homicide as the only proper response to adultery. (The concept of divorce never occurs to them.) Indeed, my major complaint about this story has to do with its recidivism: Swamp Thing had heretofore escaped the EC trap, into which most other horror comics have fallen; "Vault of Horror"- style stories are only as good as their twist endings, and never frighten the way, say, ST #29 frightens. My minor complaint about this issue has to do with Swampy himself: he doesn't belong here; getting him on the scene involves some obvious jerryrigging, and the story could have reached its denouement without his help. On the other hand, I am always amused by Moore's dead people, and I especially liked the gunfighting ghosts who've been feuding since 1851 over a deck of marked cards: "Ed retaliated by blasting the top of his opponent's head off, just above the bridge of his nose. Angered, the Dutchman put one bullet through Ed's heart, another through his throat. . .Ed screamed, and returned fire." By story's end, Ed and the Dutchman have reduced each other to little more than skeletons. And still they fight!

I also like the refrain "the sound of the hammers must never stop" -- which refers to Amy Cambridge's (and Sarah Winchester's) orders to her workmen, as well as to the hammers of guns. Moore never makes this connection explicit, even though the metaphor bears most of the story's thematic burden. Other comics scripters should learn from this example; there's a time to forego words, and let a subtle interplay of script and picture imply something never stated directly.

Incidentally, anyone trekking to San Jose with the intention of doing a little ghost-chasing had better not expect to see anything like the mansion pictured in this comic, or to have any freedom of movement within. I'm sorry to report that you cannot explore the Winchester Mystery House at will; instead, you must pay a fairly hefty entrance fee, and wait in a massive gift shop for your tour guide (invariably a charming local girl), who will very sternly warn you not to wander. Furthermore, though Stan Woch obviously used photos of the real-life mansion as reference, he changed its environs considerably; shopping malls, motels and movie theatres surround the actual "Mystery House," and they don't do much for the atmosphere -- though on the day of my visit, the marquee across the street read "Now playing: Ghostbusters." Alas, the only ghosts in the neighborhood were on screen.

Swamp Thing #46
"Revelations"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Steve Bissette and John Totleben
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza



Mistake. Input error. Does not compute.

* * *

I'm tempted to let the above stand, not just as a synopses, but as an entire review. This issue ties ST in with the Crisis on Infinite Earths, a.k.a. the Bore in Infinite Comic Books, which I didn't even try to follow past its first installment. Apparently, it did away with that Earth-2 business, it starred somebody called the Monitor, and it killed Supergirl. Beyond that, I know nothing. So there's no way to make heads or tails of this story; all I can do is repeat what I said about the Swamp Thing-JLA crossover, this time nice and loud so nobody can mistake my meaning: KEEP COMICS SEPARATE. I want to read Moore and Co.'s Swamp Thing stories, and in order to do so, I want to spend only 75 cents each month. Perhaps DC wants to raise the price? Fine. I'll pay. I'm a reasonable man. But I despise their scurrilous extortionist tactic of making me invest umpteen dollars on comics I don't care to read in order to follow comics I do care to read. Don't be fooled, fellow aficionados; these character crossovers, this Crisis craziness, and this Secret Wars silliness represent nothing more than a marketing scheme. Don't let DC or Marvel try this trick again!

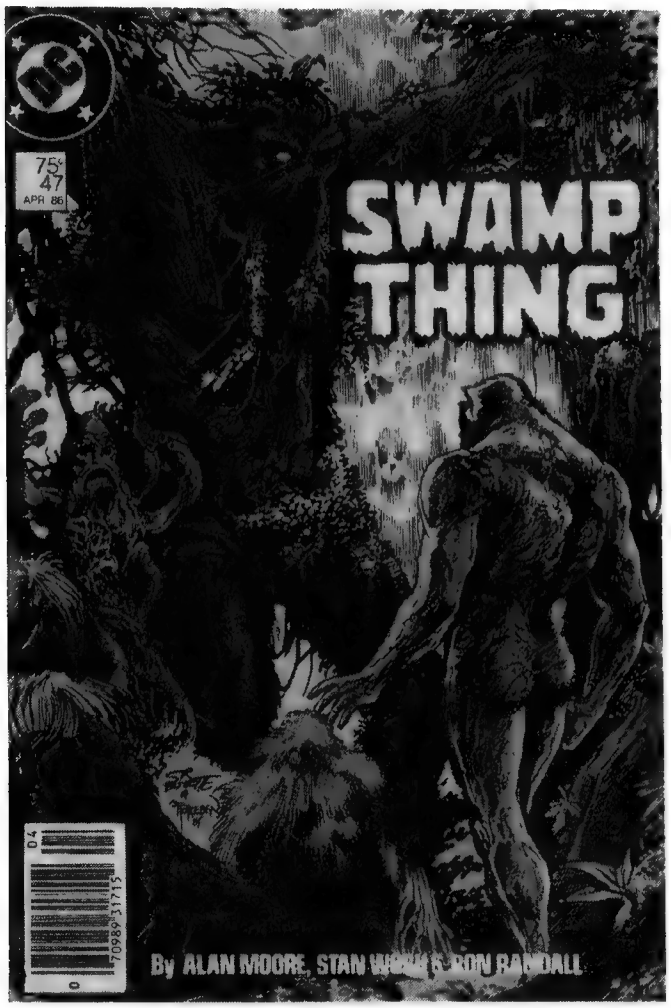
Moore is here forced (presumably, by DC higher-ups) to distort his own storyline to make it dovetail into the larger one. Both stories take an apocalyptic turn, and the apocalypses mesh uneasily; indeed, they fight each other. Perhaps as a result of this strain, Moore, for the first time in his career, delivers some truly wretched dialogue: "In order to survive, the remaining worlds are being sort of folded together, making them stronger. It'll work. A lot of people will finish up dead, but it'll work." Oh, come off it. Apparently, the Crisis storyline was so weak Moore couldn't sum it up without resorting to a lame statement using the words "sort of." A similar fuzzyness obscures Moore's own apocalypse: What's all the nonsense about "belief levels" and "the psychic atmosphere"? Moore tosses such phrases around as though they were common knowledge and easily definable, perhaps because he knows that using more concrete terms would reveal that his story just isn't there. What a lazy apocalypse this is! It's not even an apocalypse; it's a "sort of" apocalypse.

Nice art, though.

Swamp Thing #47
"The Parliament of Trees"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Stan Woch and Ron Randall
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza

ISSUES



Constantine leads Swampy to jungles of Brazil, where the Parliament of Trees is gathered. The Parliament is composed of wood elementals, former versions of ST himself; they have wearied of the world, and rooted here. Swampy asks them for the knowledge that Constantine has promised -- specifically, he wants to know the reason for all the evil he has seen recently. The ancient wooden beings deny that any such evil exists -- nature simply has its pattern, which no-one can condemn or condone. ST is obviously too immature an elemental to join their august company, so they cast him out, though not before hinting to him that he possesses as-yet undiscovered powers.

Before leaving for Brazil, ST had one last weekend dalliance with Abby. Unfortunately, a nature photographer spied on them, taking photographs of a half-nude Abby in Swampy's arms. He tries to sell these photos to the *Houma Daily Courier*; the editor recognizes Abby, and decides to run the pictures.

* * *

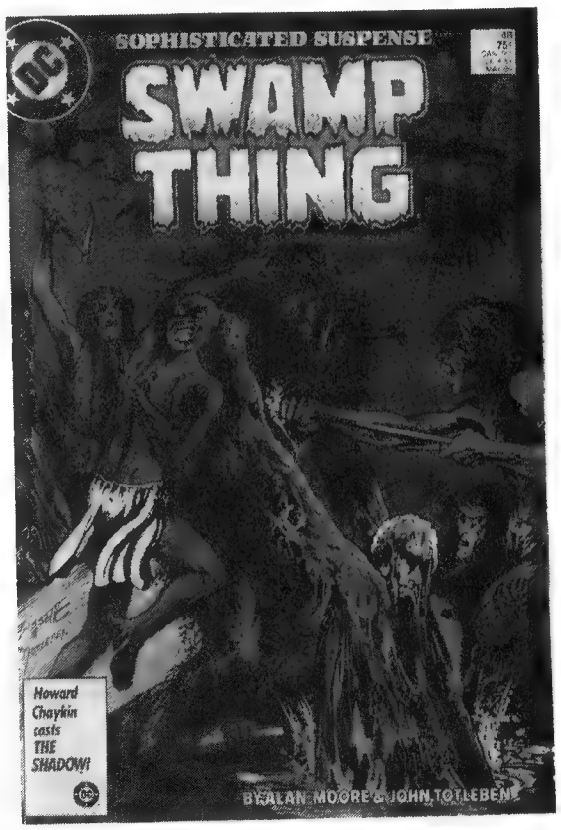
Sorry to have come down so hard on the previous episode, but defending the lower-echelon stories would cheapen praise for the nice issues. This is a nice issue. In fact, it's one of the key installments, in that it sets up storylines for the next year-or- so.. Some of the Parliament's dialogue is a bit wooden, but I suppose that's to be expected. Moore turns up the Alan Watt-age when he dishes up the Parliament's vaguely new-agey philosophy, but he never allows the everything's-all-one-and-ain't-it- beautiful riff to cloy or annoy; one never feels one's reading propaganda for Ramtha. Swamp Thing, by story's end, is immeasurably saddened by his rejection -- probably the only page of self-pity Moore has ever allowed his protagonist. Constantine, as always, amuses: "Wood elementals! They've all got dry rot, y'know. All of 'em!" But the primary attraction here may be the sub-plot involving Abby, for from that minor current, Moore will draw his most impressive ST storyline yet.

Good work by Woch and Randall, though Constantine's face isn't quite right (Woch, where is thy Sting?), and one misses the heavy shadows that anchored the drawing in previous issues. Again, Randall displays a heavy Totleben influence. I appreciate the attempt to maintain a coherent look on the book, but an artist must also be true to himself. (Take the word of someone who has himself tried, and failed, to imitate the inimitable J.T.)

But the Parliament is splendidly designed, and the storytelling -- though slightly less ballsy than Bissette's -- remains top-notch throughout. The opening two pages are particularly clever.

Swamp Thing #48
"A Murder of Crows"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artist: John Totleben
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza



Constantine has assembled his "operatives" (punker Judy, Biker Frank, Swamp Thing) on the island of Chiloe in the forests of Quincavi, to do battle with the Brujeria, a band of thoroughly hideous sorcerers mentioned frequently in previous issues as the human helpers of the great Black Thingie that's coming to crush Heaven and Earth. The four travel down into the caves, where the Brujeria are busily preparing their rituals. ST is to travel "through the green" into the lair, and the others are to prevent the Brujeria from escaping.

Everything goes wrong. The Brujeria have tossed out the houseplants; there's no greenery for ST to use for re-growing purposes. Worse, Judy's one of them; she kills Frank (just as she previously killed Benjamin Cox) and betrays Constantine. But her vanity proves her undoing: before entering, she placed a jungle flower into her mohawked hair, and Swampy uses this bloom as his entry point. . .just in time to see Judy being transformed into a crow (and quite a hideous transformation it is!). She becomes a bird to transport a black pearl to . . .where? And why? We're not told; but we suspect that her mission has much to do with the coming of the great black whatever. Swampy has to choose between stopping her and saving Constantine; he does the latter.

Louisiana: the police arrest Abby as a "sex offender." Even nature lovers, it seems, must recognize certain limits.

* * *

The above summary may sound unnecessarily vague, but believe me -- it makes more sense than the actual comic. One doesn't notice, on first reading, the oddball details that never quite add up. Exactly how do the Brujeria aid the great coming evil that threatens to devour paradise? How great can this evil be, if it needs a push-start from this motley group of warlocks? What do they hope to accomplish with that black pearl? Why are they scrubbing down a large relief map of the United States? Come to think of it, why have we spent the past ten-or-so issues on an American gothic? That stuff about "belief levels" is vague enough on its own, but what's so special about the belief levels within the continental U.S.? The scene in which punkin' Judy first seduces Frank then cuts off his head obviously derives from the Biblical (or Apocraphal, for the Lutheran) story of Judith and Holofernes -- but to what end? Why recreate the form of a well-known scriptural anecdote while ascribing a wholly different meaning to the incident? How does Judy decapitate Frank, anyways? And how is it that she and the Invunche murdered Sister Anne-Marie and Cox undetected? After all, when Constantine's girlfriend got offed in issue #37, the event was psychically broadcast to all of J.C.'s other operatives.

You have no doubt noticed a recurrent formula to many of these reviews. Though I praise Moore's psychological insight and sheer craft (both unmatched in the field), I tend to question him on grounds of logic.

Analysis of issues #22, #24, #26, #27, #30, #36, #46, #48 and other episodes all come down to the same observation: "Nice dialogue, nice drawing, but make sense, dammit!" Is this comment fair? How much logic should we expect from a comic book called Swamp Thing, anyways?

I think we ought to demand some attention to reason. Of course, all fantasy stories violate our sense of reason to a degree, but that fact only increases the writer's need to maintain a fairly rigorous internal logic; true, the fantasy author, unlike most other writers, can play the game according to his own set of rules, but if those rules contradict each other, or if we can't focus on the game board, or if the players switch positions arbitrarily, then the writer has forsaken the fantasy genre for surrealism. (Not that I dislike surrealism -- but an author shouldn't change modes capriciously, and, anyways, ST isn't weird enough to make it as surrealism.) The reader should insist upon an immediately comprehensible chain of cause-and-effect, even from stories about swamp men, miraclemen, and watchmen.

And yet, and yet. . .some perfectly fine fantasies do throw all semblance of reason to the winds. As Theodore Sturgeon once pointed out, our appreciation for Aesop's fable of the fox and the grapes doesn't diminish when we learn that foxes don't eat grapes. Similarly, we love the early Grail legends no less for the fact that they're wildly contradictory about what, exactly, the Grail is. (We usually picture the Holy G. as a cup or bowl, but some versions of the story maintain that the Grail's really a stone, some imply that it's a family, and some tell us that it's all these things at once.) We never bother to ask why all the animals in Oz can speak except for Dorothy's dog. ***Star Trek*** fans watch endless reruns without ever asking why the *Enterprise*'s command personnel -- rarely crew members of lesser rank -- beam down for the dangerous assignments. And only a sheer pedant would wonder where the gunfighting ghosts in **Swamp Thing** 45 get their ammunition.

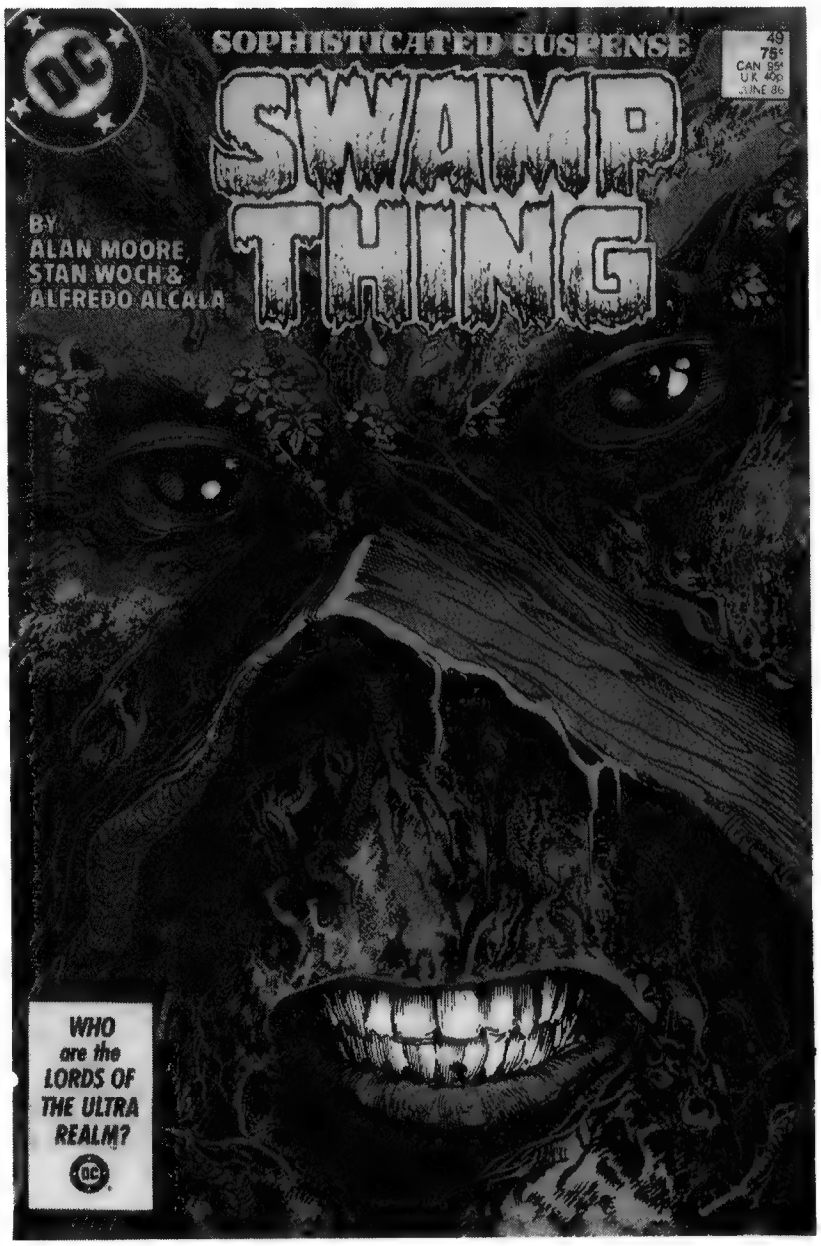
One could list many other well-known and beloved tall tales in which the author flings fudge at his audience, to no real ill effect. Where do we draw the line? What, exactly, is our criteria for saying "I accept that, but I don't accept this?" When do we demand sense and sensibility and when do we say to hell with it? I don't know. Perhaps any such judgment is arbitrary. Perhaps we must rely on simple gut instinct. My gut tends to churn a bit when I'm told that Arcane "slipped free" of Hell's grasp (if he can do it, why doesn't everybody else?), or when Jason Woodrue plugs into a dandelion, or when I'm told that the Brujeria have something to do with an imminent apocalypse, without being told what that connection is. Your gut may operate differently. There are people who can digest bicycles, and there are people who can eat only the blandest porridge.

Despite the tone of the above, I don't really dislike this issue. It makes little sense, but it does scare, as no issue since #28 has scared, especially in the transformation scene. I'm glad that we did not see Judy literally puking out her guts; explicitness on this point wouldn't have been frightening, merely repulsive. And a bitch to draw. The recurrent fade-in, fade-out technique works well, and Constantine makes a good narrator. (Too bad more issues weren't written from his viewpoint.)

For me, and for most readers, this issue provided our first full view of John Totleben's art. By this point, we knew and loved his finishes -- but how were his start-to-finishes? Very good, generally. Bissette seems to have deeply influenced his design sense, though Totleben, as of this issue, hadn't yet perfected his storytelling. Look up page 11, for example (which you can't do as easily as you should; the pages haven't been numbered): the page impresses as illustration, but our eye is immediately drawn to the large central panel; we almost don't notice the two smaller images that precede it. The very next page presents us with an odd, jagged panel design which, unfortunately, draws unwarranted attention to some background. Sequences, however, are laid out cleverly and comprehensibly, especially the terrific opening pages. Needless to say, you'll find exquisite rendering within each individual panel.

Swamp Thing #49
"The Summoning"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Stan Woch and Alfredo Alcala
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza



The Crow flees the coop. Constantine and ST separate and gather their forces: J.C. heads to Georgetown, where he uses Baron Winter's House as a rallying hall for all the mystically- oriented characters in the DC universe, while Swampy goes to Hell again, accompanied by Deadman, the Phantom Stranger, and Etrigan. The crow flies into the chaosplasm, drops the pearl, and dies so that the great evil thingamajigger can live.

* * *

ST #49 delivers, not a story, but some glue between stories. Most of Moore's transition issues tend to work pretty well on their own terms -- #37, for example, exists mainly to finish up the Nukeface story and rev up "American Gothic," yet it also has a beginning, middle, and end. "Summoning" gives us just a beginning. Truth to tell, though, many will prefer the prologue to the actual story; #49 has less scope than #50, but more fun, if only because it tends to stay on a human level. As for ST in hell -- well, many readers will feel that they've seen it before. While I don't really share this view -- my re-readings of #50 have provoked much wild-and-woolly (mostly woolly) speculation, which I shall inflict on you shortly -- something about this second foray into the worlds beyond does seem a bit forced; Moore, rather deliberately and self-consciously, is trying to top himself here. Reminds me of Houdini's predicament: once you've made an elephant disappear, what's next? Two elephants?

You can't read more than two Moore stories without noticing his fondness for puns, especially when he changes scenery, and this issue contains some of his wittiest examples. Note, especially, pages 4-5, the transition between the jungle and Washington: ". . .and I gave up the perpetual South American summer for Winter in Georgetown." That's capital-W "Winter," because we see Constantine sipping tea with the Baron of that name. Also note the later scene, in which Constantine's "It's a hell of a world" gives way to the world of hell.

Woch and Alcala mesh nicely, and the artists do a very inventive job of raising hell. Some may consider S.W. one of Swampy's more conservative pencillers, but this issue definitely gives us a Woch on the wild side.

HEY.. ARE YOU SURE WE'RE GOING THE RIGHT WAY? I'VE NEVER BEEN AS FAR AS THIS BEFORE...
WE ARE IN THE HALFWAY TERRITORIES BETWEEN HEAVEN AND THE VAST RUINATION BEYOND.
IT IS HERE WE WILL FIND THE ONE WE SEEK.

IN THE FACE OF WHAT THE BRUJERIA HAVE CALLED UP. IF HIS HELP IS REFUSED, WE ARE LOST
WE MUST FIND THE SPECTRE

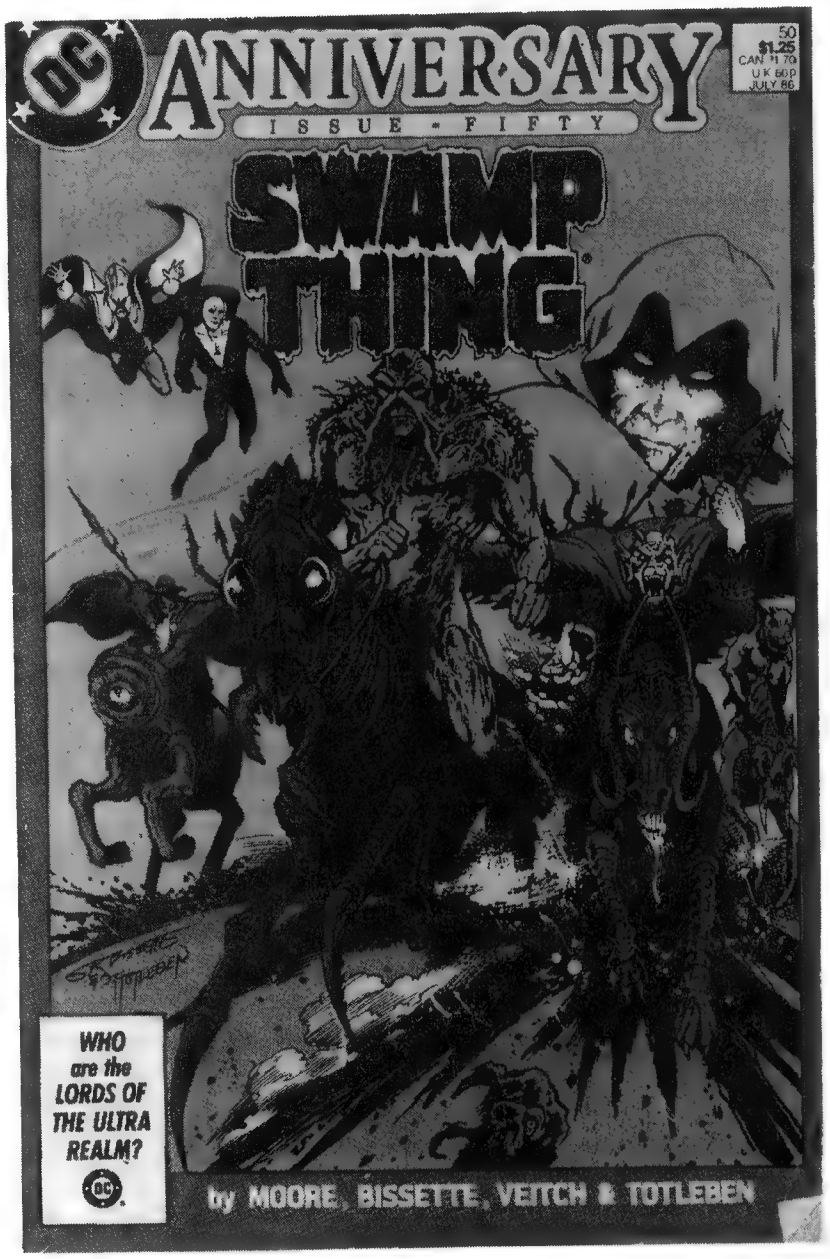
THERE IS NO NEED TO SEARCH. WALKER OF THE PATHWAYS BETWEEN SHADE AND SUBSTANCE...

THE THING YOU SEEK IS ALL ABOUT YOU.

SPECTRE... IF YOU KNOW OF OUR PRESENCE, THEN YOU KNOW WHY WE HAVE COME HERE.
OF COURSE
YOU ARE FOLLOWING THE DARK BIRD.

Swamp Thing #50
"The End"

Writer: Alan Moore
Artists: Steve Bissette, John Totleben, and Rick Veitch
Editor: Karen Berger
Colorist: Tatjana Wood
Letterer: John Costanza



God and Chaos shake hands while Mento screams "I don't understaaaaaaaaa. . ." Kzzit! The end. Coda: Cain kills Abel.

There. I gave it all away.

What's that? You want more? Something about my synopsis of ST #50 strikes you as incomplete, perhaps even confusing?

Very well. Let's start at the very beginning.

"In the dark backward and abyss of time" (i.e., long, long ago) the sages of India wrote the Upanishads, in which they mulled over the problem of evil. They decided that the damned stuff was everywhere. The world was inherently corrupt and corrupting; but it was also maya, a trick, an illusion -- sort of like a decaying movie set. You had to step back, see past this illusion, and apprehend the one truly real thing in the universe -- an infinite being they called Brahman. The big B was everything and everywhere and ever so good. And men questioned the sages of India, saying "If Brahman is everywhere, then it is also in the evil, material world. Why? Why does it manifest itself in this morass of delusion? Why does it allow the delusion to exist?" And the sages of India shuffled their feet, mumbled something, and said "Next question."

The Jews took up the question next. (The Babylonians were giving them a mighty pounding at the time, so the problem of evil was on their minds a lot.) They posited, at first, that an infinitely wise and powerful God kept this creature called Satan on his staff, who specialized in covert activities, and who could take the heat for any nasty turns of events (sort of like Col. North). But Satan was merely the agent of evil; like everything else in the universe, evil -- such as Job's financial and dermatological problems -- ultimately proceeded from the Man in Charge, who did as He pleased for reasons of His own. Any other explanation isn't monotheism, and you know how insistent the ancient Israelites were about that. Many people felt uncomfortable with this interpretation, Job not least among them.

(What has all this to do with ST #50? Everything. Have patience; you'll see.)

JOHN, DON'T BULLY HIM. IT'S TOUGH ENOUGH FOR US, AND WE'RE USED TO THIS SORT OF STUFF...
IT'S GOING TO GET A BLOODY SIGHT TOUGHER UNLESS HE COOPERATES!
BATMAN! SWAP OUT OF IT!
CAN'T... CAN'T TAKE IT...
POWER BUILDING UP AGAIN...IT WANTS US DEAD, JOHN. WE'RE A DISTRACTION...
HE'S RIGHT. I CAN FEEL IT COMING. PREPARE YOURSELF FOR ANOTHER ONSLAUGHT.

Eastern sages insisted that we must their won't, took a backside view of the matter. Like the Hindus, Plato implies, in the Republic, that the world we see around us is somehow unreal-- but he did not therefore conclude that right action consists of escaping this world through meditative or mystical means. Far from it. Plato extoll as the finest creature; Reason, he felt, was the ultimate good; evil was passion misapprehension, the clouding of logic by emotion, chaos. Plato would have grooved on Mr. Spock. But Plato, who said "Evils can never pass away," wasn't able to say why it was there in the first place.

"It's there because Adam chose it," sayeth the Christians, most notably St. Augustine, "and it was in his nature to choose it; we are inextricably bound to it, and we can escape it only through the grace of God." The Heathen counters: "But why was Adam allowed to so choose?" "Adam had free will," answers Augustine smugly, figuring that should shut him up. But this answer does not satisfy the Heathen. "Let's say that a rotted, wormy apple and some delicious chocolate ice cream have been set before me," he says. "I can choose the apple -- I'm an idiot if I do, but nevertheless I can, because I have free will. But I still gotta ask the question: Who set the table? Why such a weird menu? And why is it that everyone seems to choose the wrong item? After all, if we were truly free, you'd think we'd choose the chocolate ice cream at least some of the time." (A heretic named Pelagius has the last point.) And Augustine, like the sages of India, shuffles his feet and says "Next question."

At this point, the Scientist leaps up and says he has the answer. Or rather, he says that we have all been asking the wrong question. We can't ask "Why does evil exist?" because -- get ready ; he doesn't make judgments. There is no devil in the lab -- just observers and things to observe. So too with the rest of nature. "Ve should ignre zis whole question- uff-evil business, vhich iz chust a pain in der noggin und zo much hooey" our friend the Professor stoutly maintains. Until seems to have familiarized himself with all the preceding arguments, which, for those of you who wish to keep score, can be summarized as follows ; we escape it by merging with the Infinite.

2. The Old Testament view -- evil and good proceed from God, for His mysterious purposes The Augustinian view -- "Repent, sinner!"

5. The scientific view -- "Shut up; I'm tryin' to study neutrinos."

Moore includes all these views in his little parable about ultimate evil (not Satan -- ol' Nick's just the ultimate devil from "the ordered universe" since creation. Etrigan in confronts this Chaos, and says, as did Plato, that evil will exist always. Dr. Fate confronts Christ and says, as did Augustine, that evil is the inescapable quagmire that keeps men from seeing the light of God. The Spectre confronts Chaos, and says "others may see what ruin comes of opposing that great Voice." (It's implicit in the Spectre's argument that God permits and directs this evil.)

And who speaks for the sages of India? The Parliament of Trees, who have transcended the material world. They point out that the aphid eats leaves the insect eats the aphid, and ultimately the soil devours the insect -- where is the evil in this process? The scientist Alex Holland might have put thoughts of evil aside, but Swamp Thing has seen too much evil close-up to take much comfort from such a detached, meditative philosophy; metaphorically, you could say that he's been mugged. So when he is asked the purpose of evil, Swampy can only offer, hesitantly, a synthesis: "Perhaps evil is the humus formed by virtue's decay, and perhaps it is from that dark, sinister loam that virtue grows strongest. . ." The universe is formed by the clash, and interdependence, of these two great forces.

In other words, Alan Moore has discovered explanation #6: The Dualist view.

We haven't heard much of this philosophy lately -- not since its last major exponents, the Cathars of France, received a nasty thump on the head in 1244. (Connoisseurs of atrocity stories should check out Odel-

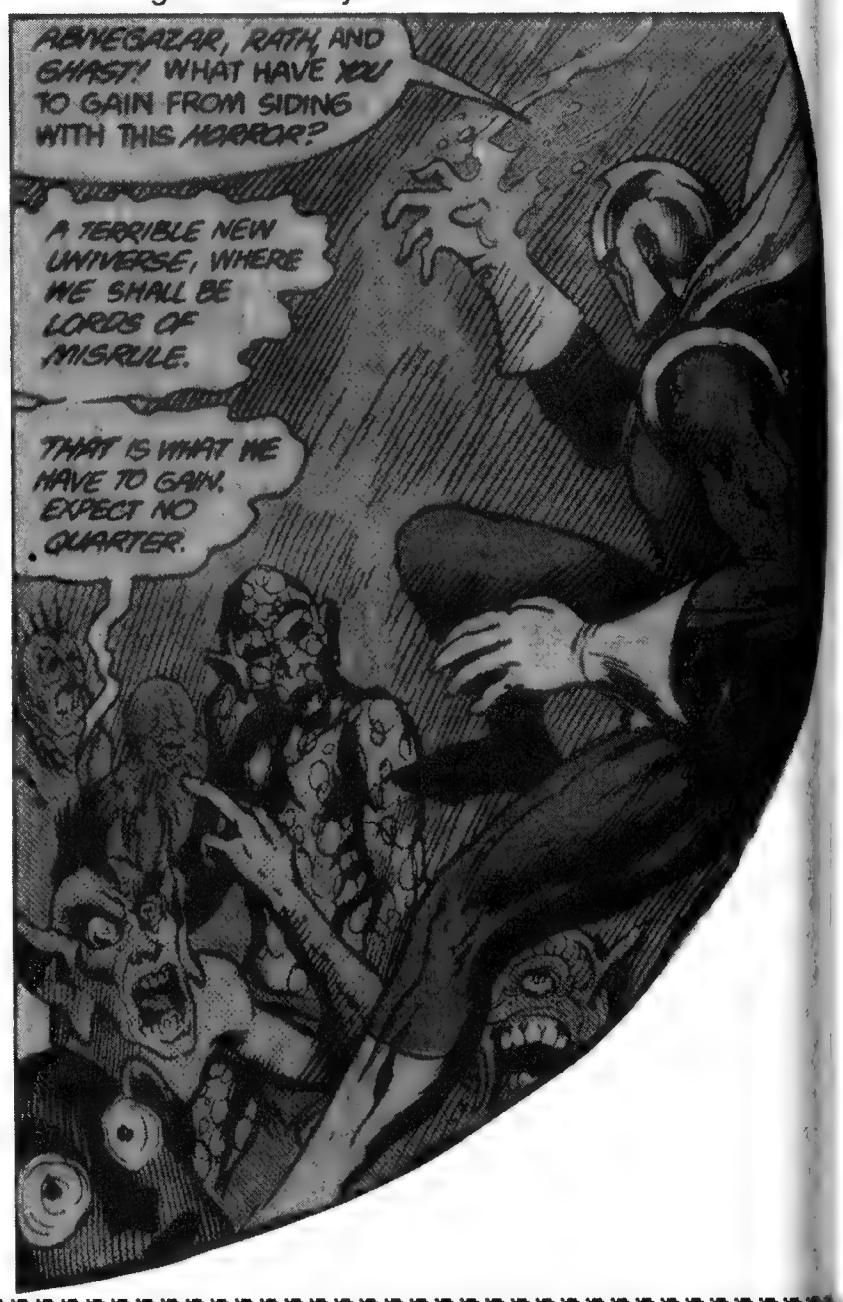
man's Massacre at Montsegur, which details the extermination of this sect.) But Dualism has always been around, in one form or another. The Cathars probably got it from the Bogomils, who in turn got it from a very interesting fellow named Mani (who taught one thing is clear: all these belief systems were united by an underlying theme, a unique way of looking at the problem of evil. There are two, roughly There are two, roughly equal Gods -- the God of love, who is pure spirit, and the evil Rex Mundi, king of this world: so taught the Cathars. There are the corroded: so says noted comic book author Alan Moore.

Interestingly, Swamp Thing's "theology" duplicates Cathar belief in several areas -- both accept Dualism, reincarnation, and the notion that the spirit of evil rules the world we know (see Swamp Thing #46, page 18, panel 4.) Moreover, both eastern mysticism with Judeo-Christian traditions. Which raises an inevitable question: Is Alan Moore a Cathar?

Probably not consciously. After all, he'd have a hard time attending services; the last Cathar ceremonies were held 750 years ago. But Catharism never truly went away; Dualism dictionary formed and variagated, lives on in numerous "New Age" movements and has figured prominently in popular metaphysical thought since approximately 1970.

Dualism always raises its head (heads?) when west meets east (Zarathustra first taught in a land roughly halfway between India and Israel), ad such a meeting took place in the late 1960s. At that time, hordes of countercultural types experimented with oriental religion, though the dalliance of Hindus and Buddhists. As for the rest -- well, many headed right back for their familiar Judeo-Christian roots, and, as we all well know, they star singing the old hymns with renewed fervor. Others began to synthesize those western roots with the eastern thought they'd acquired, and the result. . no clergy. And no fixed doctrine. And no firm sense of its own historical antecedents. But it has followers, and scripture, and an undeniably dualist view of the problem of evil, as a visit to any "metaphysical" bookstore will prove. And for further proof, you can visit the comic book store nexr-pret ST #50. This issue addresses the problem of evil. Moore considers each of the conventional answers we've grown up with, and hits upon a solutf any better name, "Neo-Catharism." And God and Chaos shake hands while Mento screams "I don't understaaaaaaaaa. " Kzzit! The end. Coda: Cain

There. I gave it all away.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"HE'S BEATEN. THE SPECTRE'S BEATEN!
"TH-THAT'S IT. IT'S TAKEN THEIR BEST SHOT. OUR ALLIES ARE FINISHED..."
NO! THE SWAMP CREATURE... WHAT'S HE DOING?
BUT... JOHN, YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND. IT'S BEATEN THE SPECTRE.. THE SWAMP THING CAN'T...
I SAID WHAT'S HE DOING? DAMN IT, DAYTON, THIS IS WHAT I PREPARED HIM FOR!
"HE.. HE'S WITH THE STRANGER. THEY'RE GAZING UP AT THE APPROACHING CREATURE...
"THE STRANGER... HE'S SO UNCERTAIN, INSIDE HIMSELF. HE'S SHAKING HIS HEAD, TURNING AWAY... HE SEEMS ALMOST AFRAID...
"BUT... BUT THE SWAMP THING.. HE'S WALKING TOWARDS IT, TOWARDS THE WALL OF BLACKNESS.
"HE... JOHN, HE'S GOING TO MEET IT. HE'S GOING...
"GONE."

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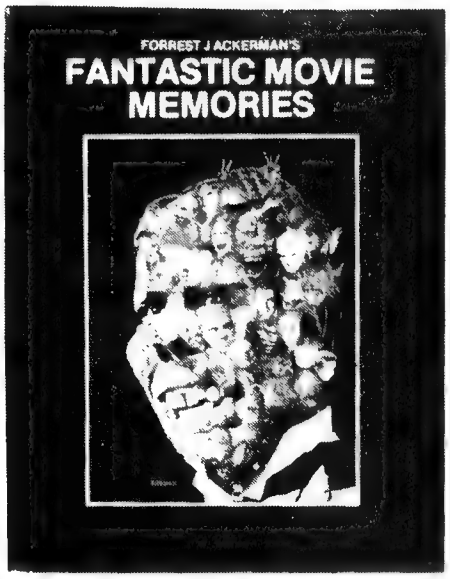

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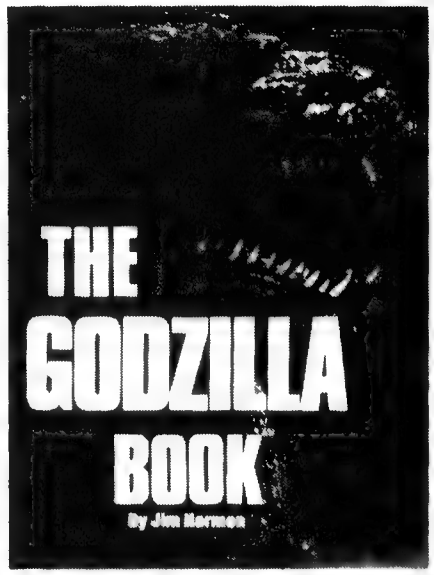

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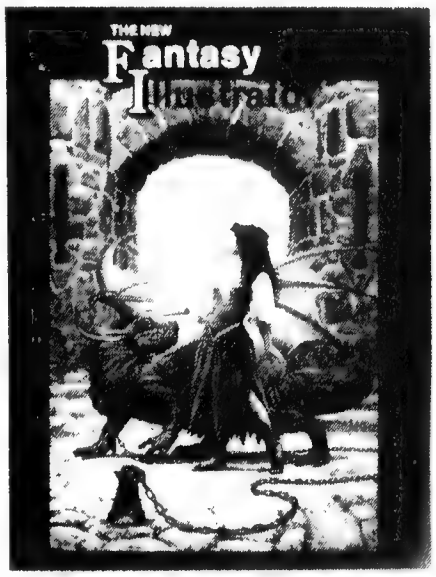

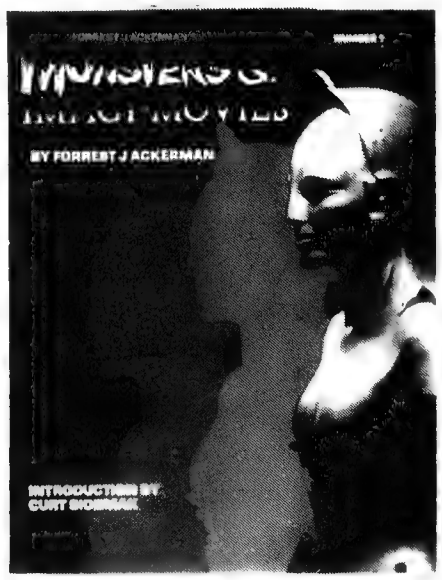

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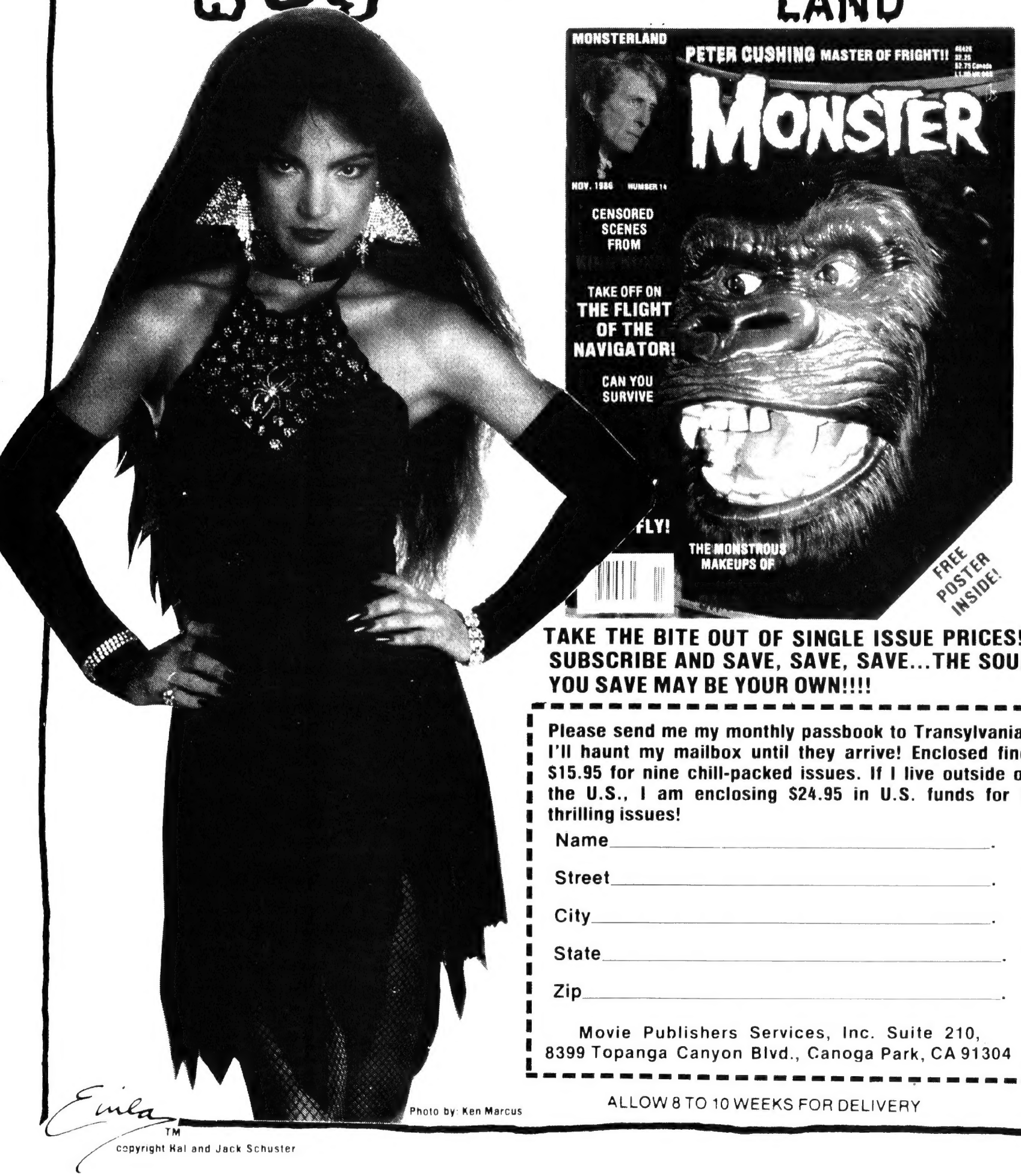

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